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Artifacts worthy of a princess

Islamic artifacts for sale? Omayma Abdel-Latif investigates

Culture Minister Farouk Hosni is to unveil an investigation involving a number of high officials at the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), for allegedly allowing valuable Islamic artifacts to be taken out of the country.

Sources at the minister's office told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that a legal memorandum was being prepared, spelling out the punishment that would befall the officials if they were found guilty.

The Administrative Prosecutor's Office, a body that investigates malpractices of government officials, had already pointed an accusing finger at highly-placed SCA officials.

The drama unfolded in December 1994 when an Arab princess arrived at the departure lounge of Cairo Airport with 16 packages.

The packages were stopped by customs officials, and a search revealed the artifacts, including 200-year-old manuscripts, paintings, an ancient copy of the Holy Qur'an and books dating from the early Islamic era.

An examining committee determined that the contents were originals. The committee ordered the packages to be confiscated and reported the matter to the Tourist and Antiquities Police and the Islamic Museum.

"All the confiscated items were then documented, and a report was submitted to the Administrative Prosecutor's Office," reported Ali Hassan, head of the examining committee.

The SCA ignored the committee's findings and issued an official letter describing the artifacts as "replicas" and ordering that they be delivered to the Arab princess's embassy within 24 hours, the prosecutor's report said.

But according to an officer from the Tourist and Antiquities Police office at the airport, who asked that his name be withheld, "The SCA did not send anybody to determine whether the artifacts were originals or not."

Fahmi Abdel-Alim, head of the Islamic Antiquities Department at the SCA, denied that the SCA was guilty of malpractice. The problem, he said, had resulted from "the overlapping responsibilities of the SCA and Dar Al-Kutub [the national library]."

"The manuscripts and the copy of the Qur'an belong to Dar Al-Kutub, and not the Islamic Museum, which is affiliated to the SCA," Abdel-Alim explained.

Asked about the official letter issued by the SCA, he said that the SCA's secretary-general, Abdel-Halim Noureddin "did not issue any letters, because the SCA does not have the authority to approve the removal of such artifacts from the country."

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BAB ZUWEILA, Zam: The holiest of months may already be more than halfway through, but there's still plenty of time to enjoy its serene, surreal evenings (see p.13)

US pushes covenant change

Warren Christopher, on his 17th Middle East shuttle, pressed Yasser Arafat to have the PLO covenant amended

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher met Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in self-ruled Gaza yesterday after securing a Syrian commitment to continue the peace negotiations with Israel. US officials said they expected Christopher to press Arafat on the importance of removing from the PLO covenant articles that indirectly call for Israel's destruction.

Following an hour-long meeting at a Palestinian guest house in the village of Beit Hanoun near the Erez crossing point between Israel and Gaza, Christopher announced an additional \$2.7 million in aid to the Palestinian National Authority.

Christopher said the United States remained committed to the effort to "mobilise international support for economic development" in the Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank and Gaza. As part of this effort, "the United States will allocate 2.7 million dollars to help the democratisation in Gaza and the West Bank", Christopher said.

After the talks, Christopher was returning to Tel Aviv to

brief Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres — whom he saw on Monday — on his Tuesday visit with Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad in Damascus.

Christopher, on his 17th Middle East peace mission, persuaded Assad to send a delegation to resume negotiations with Israel at a secluded venue outside Washington on 26 February. The talks, still stuck over the future of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, will take place regardless of whether Israel calls early elections in May, as expected.

Arafat said he and Christopher had discussed Israel's demand that the PLO revoke references to the destruction of Israel from the Palestinian national charter. "We are committed to what we have agreed upon, but this change of the charter is the authority of the Palestinian National Council and the process must be carried out democratically," Arafat said.

Arafat also said he asked Christopher to press Israel to follow through with its promises to free all female Palestinian prisoners in its jails and to halt the con-

fiscation of Palestinian lands on the West Bank. In Damascus, the official Syrian press accused Israel of trying to torpedo the negotiations by planning to call for early elections. "Despite the pessimistic mood that accompanied the last negotiations and despite Israeli threats to carry out early elections, Syria has once again given the peace process a new chance," said the government newspaper *Al-Thawra*. "... Now it is time for the other side [Israel] to prove that it is serious in the next round of negotiations."

The *Thawra* newspaper accused Israel of setting "obstacles and hurdles that do not serve the efforts that are being deployed to achieve real and lasting peace".

Israel, for its part, welcomed Syria's readiness to resume the negotiations. "The resumption of talks regardless of the election campaign that is going to begin soon in Israel shows that we are on the right track and that the negotiations are serious," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor.

Dreams and reality

The 18-member PLO executive committee, the PLO's ruling body, ended its two-day meeting in the Egyptian city of Al-Arish on Tuesday without announcing a date for the convening of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the Palestinian Parliament in exile, which is due to consider rescinding articles in the Palestinian Covenant calling for an end to the Zionist state of Israel. Israeli demands for the changes reached fever pitch following the Palestinian elections on 20 January, overshadowing aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli settlement that are of more relevance in the present stage, at least from the Palestinian point of view.

Abdullah Hourani, former PLO minister of culture, who suspended his membership of the Executive Committee in protest against the Oslo accords but who recently returned to the fold, responded to questions about the failure to announce a date for the convening of the PNC, saying: "We did not consider it a matter of urgency."

It may well not be a top priority for the Palestinians but as long as the Israelis insist that for them it is, the issue will continue to overshadow everything else, reflecting the imbalance of power between the two parties and underlining the fact that it is the Israelis who set the agenda.

There is no argument over Arafat having committed himself to rescinding the articles. His letter of recognition, sent to the Israeli Prime Minister on 9 September 1993, states that "the PLO undertakes to submit to the Palestinian National Council for formal approval the necessary changes in regard to the Palestinian Covenant." Two years later the Oslo agreement stated: "The PLO undertakes that, within two months of the date of the inauguration of the council, the Palestinian National Council will convene and formally approve the necessary changes in regard to the Palestinian Covenant, as undertaken in the letters signed by the chairman of the PLO and addressed to the prime minister of Israel, dated 9 September 1993 and 4 May 1994."

The PNC was established in 1964, at the same time as the PLO, and has met 20 times in the last three decades, though never with all members present. The covenant was published in 1968, a year before Arafat became head of both the PLO and the PNC. The PNC comprises some 480 members from the diaspora, and 186 members from inside the Territories, though the latter quota has never been fulfilled. The 88 members of the newly-elected Palestinian Council are expected to become ex officio members of the PNC.

Of the current membership slightly over 200 members live abroad, according to Acting Speaker of the PNC Selim Za'noun. Another approximately 200 PNC members have already returned since Israel began allowing the return of exiled Palestinians in 1993. With these members originally residing inside the Territories, this means that more than 350 now live under the Palestinian Authority.

Convening a quorate PNC emergency meeting to change the covenant should not then be a problem for the Palestinian Authority, especially given Israel's announcement that all PNC members abroad can return. The reluctance of the Palestinian Authority, it would seem, has more to do with symbolism than procedural difficulties. Demands to repeal the articles is seen as little more than a flexing of muscles on the part of the Israelis.

Palestinians are quick to point out that the 1988 Algiers declaration of independence, by recognising Israel's right to exist, has already effectively annulled those articles in the covenant calling for the destruction of the Zionist entity. A year later, in Paris, Arafat reinforced this position, when he declared that the covenant was "caduc".

"If it was simply a matter of few lines in the covenant, or even the whole document, we would have gladly destroyed it, since it is impossible outdated," announced Gamal Sourani, Secretary of the PLO Executive Committee last week from his home in Gaza. "The main point of this demand, however, is to humiliate us... They want to prostitute the Palestinian national struggle, in order to claim before the world that the leaders of this struggle were a bunch of killers and terrorists. Fortunately, nobody can obliterate history."

Many people now argue that it is not only the covenant that is outdated. The PNC and PLO have also been superseded by the newly-elected Palestinian Council and the Palestinian Executive Authority respectively. Arafat's closure of his Tunis headquarters in June 1994, ahead of his return to Gaza the following month, was seen by many observers as the final nail in the coffin of the PLO. The PLO, however, still exists, albeit in a very changed form. The coexistence of old structures such as the PLO and the PNC with new ones like the Palestinian Council and the Executive Authority allows Arafat a margin for manoeuvre when it comes to implementing some of the harsher terms he accepted to his deal with Israel.

As Edward Said noted: "What the Israelis want is control and hegemony, and they have tried to write this in their agreement. But no matter how many details are put down on paper, and no matter how many contingencies you try to deal with, you cannot control everything... It seems likely that the PLO will continue with its present tactics, acting as if it were not bound by an agreement that explicitly prevents statehood. This in turn may or may not yield statehood."

The discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Palestinian Authority and what the Israelis demand of them was highlighted in the statements made by Arafat and his second in chief Abu Mazen following the elections. On 21 January Abu Mazen told the press that "the Palestinians are five minutes from statehood" and that the Palestinian state will be declared in three years. The following day Arafat told a press conference for Egyptian journalists covering the elections in Gaza that if negotiations with Israel were intensified, a Palestinian state may emerge in 18 months.

Peres' response to Abu Mazen's statement was to ask: "What independence is he talking about. Over 27 per cent of the area?" Arafat, when asked about his statement at the joint press conference held with Peres at the Erez checkpoint on 24 January, said: "It is my right to dream." Peres responded with a smile. "As long as it is a dream."

This week, at the Davos World Economic Forum meeting, Peres reiterated the same message, telling a press conference shortly after his meeting with Arafat that "Arafat has the right to have his own dreams. For dreams you need only one party. For an agreement you have to have two."

Global goals

The world's main movers returned to Davos to reflect on ways and means of responding to the advent of the global era, write **Gamil Ibrahim** in Geneva and **Samia Nkrumah** in Cairo

Leading business and government figures met in Davos, a small Alpine resort in north-east Switzerland, for the annual week-long World Economic Forum (WEF), which ended yesterday. What began in 1971 as a gathering of less than 300 businessmen and academics had, this year, grown into a 1,600-strong congregation.

The Geneva-based independent foundation is now in its twenty-sixth year. Members pay around US\$8,900 each to attend the forum; non-members are prepared to pay double that fee to hear a succession of world leaders speak. Only government officials are exempted from fees.

The forum's topic this year was globalisation and integration. Discussions focused on dismantling trade barriers and opening up markets under the umbrella of the World Trade Organisation. But reconciling economic and political rights is proving to be a challenge to globalisation. If globalisation is the name of the game, there are bound to be winners and losers. Those attending at Davos heard politicians warn of different forms of resistance: increasing regionalism, protectionism, rising nationalism, fundamentalism, and terrorism.

For the second year running, labour union leaders were invited to Davos. They waged a strong onslaught on the dangers of chipping away at the welfare system and incorporating standards of the developing countries into developed ones.

While last year's Davos meeting was dominated by the Mexican crisis, precipitated by the peso's devaluation, this year it was Russia's economic worries that took centre stage. Fears focused on the socio-economic costs of reforms in Russia and the threat of a communist revival.

Middle East economic prospects also featured in discussion. Like Russia, the Palestinian National Authority is looking towards the international community for political and economic support. Yasser Arafat called for greater international aid to the Palestinians last week.

The yearly forum has earned a certain kudos as far as the Middle East is concerned. It is at Davos that the seeds of the PLO-Israeli peace talks were first sown, when Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, then foreign minister, met as guests at the WEF in 1993. However, this year's reunion was overshadowed by concern over the financial state of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Davos was also the setting of the bargaining process over Jerusalem, with Peres insisting that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, "not to be sold or divided", and Arafat restating the Palestinians' right to make it the capital of a future Palestinian state.

PNA Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Nabil Shaath called for "liberalisation of trade with Israel as well as an end to closure regulations that stifled commerce".

The WEF statement noted that "all participants [in the Middle East session] agreed that it would be premature and counter-productive to talk of economic integration at this stage". Hence, efforts would focus on "infrastructure, regional transport development, small- and medium-sized businesses and increasing foreign investment".

Raouf Choukri, Egypt's Ambassador to Switzerland, said that Egypt had participated in the Davos meetings with an active delegation led by Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. Minister of Finance Moawad El-Gharib highlighted the latest facilities introduced by the government to improve the investment climate: pursuing reforms, cutting taxes, and granting foreigners land ownership rights to set up investment projects.

The forum also presented Egypt with the opportunity to discuss preparations for the third Middle East/North Africa economic summit to be held in Cairo next November. The summit will "focus on concrete agreements and joint projects", according to Moussa.

KURASAT ISTRATIJIYA (32)



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Trafficking in espionage

Spying is a fact of life in time of peace as well as war, experts acknowledge. But the alleged Israeli introduction of heroin into Egypt as payment for espionage information has added a grave new aspect to a recent case. Galal Nasser investigates



Khalil Howaidy El-Magdoub

Amer Salman, a Sinai bedouin living in the border town of Rafah, was arrested at the beginning of 1993 after confessing to working as an agent for Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, for the previous 11 years. But Salman's case only grabbed public attention on 16 January this year, when Prosecutor-General Raga'a El-Arabi sent him for trial before the Supreme State Security Court.

Although experts attempted to play down the case, it was nevertheless given wide coverage in the Arabic-language press — apparently in response to what writers viewed as "hostile" or "unfriendly" statements by Israel's new Foreign Minister Ehud Barak. The newspapers also launched an anti-Barak campaign, describing him as "uncouth" and charging that he knew nothing about diplomacy.

Salman, 51, who worked as a porter at a Rafah school, confessed to interrogators that he had been recruited by the Israelis after being caught red-handed stealing two refrigerators from the Israeli settlement of Yamit in February 1982, before it was dismantled under the terms of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

Salman admitted that he visited the Israeli town of Beersheba on many occasions for instruction on gathering information about Egyptian military movements in the Sinai desert — particularly in areas where heavy weaponry is either restricted or prohibited by the peace treaty. He was also taken to an Israeli army camp near Tel Aviv, where he was trained in identifying heavy tanks in the Egyptian arsenal, such as the Russian T-55 and the American M-60.

In return, Salman was paid a monthly stipend of LE300 and given occasional financial bonuses. He was also reported to have been provided with 12 kilograms of heroin, with a street value of \$12 million.

Before his arrest, Salman tried to recruit two other Sinai bedouins, reportedly in return for heroin, but they turned him down and tipped off the Egyptian authorities about his activities.

While military and other experts maintained that espionage, even in peace time, was inevitable, they cautioned that the issue would assume far graver proportions if it was proved that the Israeli government was

behind heroin smuggling into Egypt.

"Spying is not necessarily restricted to hostile nations or war situations. It goes on all the time," said Taha El-Magdoub, a retired army general who was involved in negotiating the 1979 treaty. "Each side tries to gather information by any means possible. Even the United States, which is Israel's strategic ally, has uncovered a number of Israeli agents who were gathering technological information that could be used in Israel's military industry."

Salman's activities, Magdoub said, were not particularly important because he did not, and could not, infiltrate the military establishment. The most he could do was observe troop movements from a distance — movements which were never part of a mobilisation for battle.

"What is serious in this case, however, is the smuggling of heroin across the border for peddling to Egyptian young people," he continued. "If it is proved conclusively that the Israeli government was behind these smuggling operations, then Egypt has the right to lodge an official protest, because heroin smuggling is an offence as serious as terrorism and killing."

Amin Howaidy, a former chief of the Egyptian intelligence service, concurred that "spying takes place all the time, by friends and enemies alike". In fact, he said, there was more spying in peace time because peace makes the job easier.

The Egyptian response, Howaidy believes, should be an escalation in its own spying activities.

"There is competition between us [Egypt and Israel] in gathering information about technology, production, market conditions and the domestic situation. War is only one means of resolving conflicts. In peace time, intelligence work is the main tool."

However, according to former Prime Minister Moustafa Khalil, while spying is par for the course, drug and arms trafficking cannot be tolerated, because they pose a threat to national security.

Khalil said that Egypt should seek clarification if it was proved that Israeli agencies were officially behind the smuggling. However, while

stressing that "any act of this kind is rejected by Egypt", he nevertheless concluded that "we cannot say it casts doubt on Israel's credibility as a peace-maker."

But opinion differed in other circles. Wagih Abu Zikri, a columnist in the newspaper *Al-Akhar*, wrote in an article published last Friday that Israel had acted as if it was still at war with Egypt. "It is not a secret that Israel is seeking to set up a Jordanian-Israeli front to confront Egypt politically and economically because Egypt does not want to come under the Israeli umbrella."

"At the same time, Israel refuses a peace of equals with Egypt and believes that the Middle East conflict is basically an Egyptian-Israeli conflict that will continue in the future. Israel is acting as if the current state of peace was provisional and gathers information as if it were in a state of war with Egypt."

Abu Zikri quoted a highly-placed security source as saying that Mossad "is operating actively and efficiently these days to gather economic, military and scientific information about Egypt", and described the Israeli academic centre in Cairo as a "centre for spying and gathering information about everything".

Salman's arrest raised to 12 the number of Israeli spying cases that have been uncovered since President Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981. Twelve other cases were uncovered under the rule of Gamal Abdel-Nasser and two under Anwar El-Sadat. In the 26 cases, spying charges were filed against a total of 24 Egyptians in addition to other foreign nationals, including Palestinians, Australians and a Syrian.

A case that made headlines in 1992 was the arrest of Fares Sobhi Mesrani, an Israeli national, his daughter Fayza, and an Egyptian named Ali Hassan Attiya. Although Mesrani and his daughter were put on trial, charges against them were later dropped because the information they had allegedly gathered was of no intelligence value whatsoever.

Peace under guard

Defence Minister Field Marshal Tantawi said that there was a role for the military in peace as well as in war, and that the armed forces were determined to raise their combat efficiency

Defence Minister Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, in his first report to the National Security Committee of the People's Assembly, stressed that Egypt's national security was inextricably linked to that of other Arab and African states. "Any threat, whether direct or indirect, to the security of an Arab or African state is a threat to our national security," he said.

"The armed forces are continuing to work with full determination to raise their combat efficiency so that they may remain the bulwark of this nation, prepared to discharge their duties at any time and in every direction," Tantawi told the committee on Tuesday.

Declaring that "peace does not mean relaxation", Tantawi noted the rapid, and seemingly unending, advances in armament technology. Meanwhile, "Challenges and conflicts are also growing and assuming various forms, as if they were affirming the time-honoured principle that survival is for the fittest and that military force is the decisive means."

But he stressed that the armed services had a role to play in peace as well as in war. "The use of military force is no longer confined to wars, combat and bloodshed. It has also become the means of imposing peace. Military force is a necessity in times of war and times of peace."

Reviewing international developments and their impact on national security, Tantawi noted the emergence of economic groupings and escalating rivalries between the major economic powers. Another feature of the new world order, he said, is that crisis-management was undertaken by the major powers in accordance with their own interests. A third feature was the proliferation of terrorism, whether for political, ethnic or religious reasons.

Turning to the region, Tantawi said that continued divisions within the Arab world "create the appropriate climate for other regional powers to achieve their target of exercising hegemony over the region".

Egypt's own military policy was to "protect national security, safeguard international borders, territorial waters and airspace, back the constitutional legality [the government] and provide assistance to friendly Arab and African states".

The importance attached to cooperation with friendly Arab and other states had been demonstrated, he said, by the six joint military exercises staged in cooperation with the United States, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Tantawi added that the national military industry was being upgraded, "so it can become a source of national income".

Local councils ruled unconstitutional

After a legal battle that dragged on for years, the Supreme Constitutional Court has finally ruled that a 1979 law regulating local (municipal) council elections according to a combination of the state and individual candidacy systems was unconstitutional. The court, under Judge Awad El-Mor, declared that the membership of hundreds of local councils across the nation was null and void because the law favoured candidates on political party slates and did not give an equal opportunity to independents.

"All citizens should have an equal chance in contesting the seats of local councils", the judgement said. "This law is totally biased in favour of candidates listed on the political party slates, giving them the opportunity to win all the seats on a local council except one. This remaining seat has to be contested by both independents and political party members who were not listed on their party slates. This means that political party members, simply because they are political party members, have a larger representation in these councils as well as a higher position in the social structure, despite the fact that the constitution enshrines the principle of equal political rights for all."

Following the last local council election, in 1992,

The Supreme Constitutional Court quashed a law governing local council elections on the grounds that it discriminated against independent candidates and favoured those running on party slates. Amira Howaidy reports

two lawyers — Negad El-Borai, secretary-general of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) and Essam El-Islambouli — initiated legal action to contest the law's constitutionality. In doing so, they emulated the example of Kamal Khaled, a former member of parliament, who won a ruling from the Constitutional Court in 1987 that the parliamentary election law was unconstitutional, also because it combined the individual and slate systems. Three years earlier, in 1984, the Constitutional Court, ruling in another lawsuit filed by Khaled, declared that an election law based exclusively on the slate system was also unconstitutional because it made no room for independents.

El-Borai told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that his objective was "not limited to dissolving the local councils or abolishing the election law". His larger aim was to sanction the individual candidacy system for all elec-

tions, a policy which might require some constitutional amendments. And with the court's ruling, handed down on Saturday, it seems that, despite reported misgivings by some NDP members said to advocate a return to the slate system, the government has little choice but to introduce the individual candidacy system to local elections.

Local administration minister Mahmoud Sherif said on Sunday that the government would finish drafting a new local council election law within days. "The prevailing trend is that the elections will be based on the individual system", Sherif told the Local Administration Committee of the People's Assembly.

Following the Constitutional Court's ruling, he ordered that all local councils should stop work. "We rejected the argument that the councils should continue to function until a new law was passed", Sherif said.

But he added that all decisions taken to date by those councils were legal and would remain in force.

The date of the new elections, expected this year, would be set by the new law, Sherif said. Committee members demanded that the new law should also breathe new life into the local councils, by giving them a larger role to play in the provision of public services.

Abdel-Fattah El-Dak, the committee's chairman, welcomed the court's decision, but raised the possibility that the elections might have to be delayed. He described the old law as "obviously unconstitutional" and the court's ruling as "expected".

"The ruling means that the coming elections must be based on the individual candidacy system", he said. "The work of the dissolved local councils should be taken over by provisional committees and the elections may have to be postponed until a new law is prepared."

According to Kamal Khaled, the veteran campaigner against the slate system in parliamentary elections, the legal battle to have the old law repealed was part of a drive by several lawyers to guarantee the integrity of all elections.

Journalists 'gravely concerned'

As more newspaper editors are taken to court on libel charges under Law 93, the Press Syndicate expresses grave concern. Shaden Shahab reports



SWearing-in ceremony: More than 350 journalists enrolling in the Press Syndicate took an oath to uphold the ethics of the profession on Monday. Ibrahim Nafie, the syndicate's chairman, was reviving an old syndicate tradition which had been dropped many years ago. In chorus, led by Nafie, the journalists pledged to "safeguard the interest of the homeland, perform my vocation with honour, honesty and integrity, keep the secrets of the profession and respect its ethics and traditions"

The Press Syndicate's council has expressed grave concern for what it described as an "escalating trend" to investigate journalists and bring them to trial in accordance with Law 93 for 1995, the press law providing harsh penalties for the publication of false or malicious news. The statement said the law "violates the simplest rules of justice" and that its "oppressive punishments" are neither democratic nor civilised.

An unprecedentedly large number of journalists have been investigated or tried for alleged publication offences during the last few months, the statement said. Several of them, who worked for both national and opposition newspapers, received harsh prison sentences and heavy fines, "as if terrorising journalists by means of this law and threatening their security and their future were an end in itself."

In a statement issued on Monday, the syndicate's council declared "full solidarity with the victims of Law 93, regardless of their professional and political affiliations", along with "determination to counteract the consequences of this law and defend the freedom of the press".

Earlier, the syndicate's chairman, Ibrahim Nafie, announced that a government-appointed committee, commissioned to draft a new press law to replace Law 93, would complete its task before the end of this month. Nafie said the committee draft, intended to reflect the views of the majority of journalists and safeguard the freedom of the press as well as the "rights of society", would be submitted to the legislative bodies — the Shura Council and the People's Assembly.

Journalists have protested against Law 93 since it was passed by the outgoing

People's Assembly last May, and have pledged to work for its repeal. Despite government assurances that Law 93 would remain dormant until new legislation was passed, it has already been invoked against several syndicate members.

Magdi Hussein, editor-in-chief of *Al-Shaab*, mouthpiece of the Islamist-oriented Labour Party, was found guilty by a Cairo misdemeanours court last week of slandering Alas El-Alfi, son of Interior Minister Hassan El-Alfi. Hussein had published an article accusing an unnamed "son of a high official" of refusing to pay a hotel bill and insulting the hotel manager for demanding payment. He was given a one-year suspended sentence and a LE15,000 fine.

In December, Abdel-Aal El-Bagouri, editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahali*, mouthpiece of the leftist Tagammu Party, and one of the newspaper's reporters, were sentenced in absentia by the Damanhour criminal

court to two years imprisonment for accusing a police officer of influence-peddling. Around the same time, Mahmoud El-Tohami, editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Rose El-Foussaf*, was given a two-year suspended sentence for publishing an article considered defamatory to Islamist lawyers. In the latter case, the article had appeared before Law 93 was passed, so El-Tohami's trial was conducted according to the previous publication law.

Gamal Badawi, editor-in-chief of *Al-Wafd* newspaper, is currently standing trial for publishing a story alleging that Hassan Sallam, a member of the outgoing People's Assembly, was guilty of seizing state property.

Meanwhile, Magdi Hussein's problems continue. Along with Mustafa Bakri, editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram*, mouthpiece of the Liberal Party, and his brother Mahmoud Bakri, chief editor of the local

newspaper, *Sawt Helwan*, Hussein is due in court again to face charges of libel against Mohamed Ali Mahgoub, former minister of *Al-Awqaf* (religious endowments). The three claimed that Mahgoub had hired thugs to intimidate voters in the recent parliamentary elections. During the elections, Mustafa Bakri was running against Mahgoub in the constituency of Helwan, south of Cairo. Mahgoub won.

Gamal Badawi told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that "journalists will continue to be dragged in police stations and courts until we succeed in getting Law 93 repealed. We have suffered a great deal of humiliation."

Magdi Hussein's lawyers took steps towards a repeal during his trial. They sought the judge's permission to contest the legality of Law 93 before the Supreme Constitutional Court, but the judge refused, arguing that the lawyers had not

submitted adequate documents to justify their request. Hussein, however, insisted that all the necessary documents had been submitted to the court. "It is obvious that Law 93 is unconstitutional", commented Counsellor Yehia Rifa'i, who helped compile Hussein's documents. "It was not even necessary to submit those documents. Our main evidence is the constitution itself."

"It is completely up to the judge to decide whether the constitutionality of any law should be contested", countered Fawzia Abdel-Sattar, former chairwoman of parliament's legislative committee. "There are no special criteria. If the judge says that the submitted documents are not adequate, we must believe that this is so. The court's judgement should not be questioned because judges represent justice."

Lottery winners, dream losers

Ahmed El-Hadidi illegally entered the United States two years ago in pursuit of a better life. But he decided to return home, hoping that he would be chosen by a US government immigration programme that would guarantee him the right to live permanently, and legally, in the United States. But to the disappointment of El-Hadidi and a few hundred other Egyptian applicants to the Diversity Visa programme, things did not turn out as they had hoped.

The programme was introduced by the US administration two years ago to make it possible for thousands of people from all over the world to enter the United States legally, get a residence permit and, eventually, US citizenship.

Charles J. Wintheiser, consul-general secretary at the US Embassy in Cairo, explained that the US Congress had decided to initiate the programme in 1990 because "under previous immigration law, a large percentage of immigrants to the United States came from a small number of countries", and that "it would be in our advantage to offer additional opportunities in people to immigrate from other countries".

Under the DV programme, a maximum 55,000 diversity visas can be issued worldwide every year. Within this overall quota, there are also regional and country limits. The end result of these complicated calculations is that a little over 2,500 visas can be issued to Egyptians every year under the programme. When an applicant's name is chosen in the computerised lottery held at the National Visa Centre in the US, he or she becomes eligible for an

interview. If this is successful the candidate can then apply for an entry visa to the US.

The programme opened a new door of hope for millions of people across the world who saw American citizenship as a means to improve their lives. El-Hadidi was one of about 3,000 Egyptian applicants last year. But he and others were eventually turned down. "We were deceived", claimed the 37-year-old El-Hadidi — a charge hotly denied by Wintheiser, who asserted that the US Embassy acted in good faith.

"We filed an application", El-Hadidi explained. "We completed all the papers correctly, and received letters from the US Embassy congratulating us for winning the lottery. We did the medical check-ups. We went to get our visas, but then the delays began and eventually no visas were issued."

Like El-Hadidi, dozens of other applicants were left with a sense of bitterness, feeling that they had been betrayed after spending "thousands" of pounds in preparing their papers. Fouad Ragheh, a 35-year-old surgeon, claimed that he spent as much as LE4,000 on this process. But for Wintheiser, this figure is too high to be credible.

He insisted that the US embassy does not charge high fees for processing an application. "The application fee is \$170 or the equivalent in Egyptian pounds. People have to undergo a medical exam, which they pay for. They also need to provide documents such as birth certificates and the like. LE4,000 seems a little extreme to me."

According to the consular official, applicants to the programme should have the equivalent of a US high school education or a skill that is deemed equivalent. Interested individuals should send their applications to the National Visa Centre in the United States. "Last fiscal year, 1995, which ran from October 1994 to September 1995, was the first year of the programme. Three thousand Egyptians applied. Of those, 2,400 were given visas and they should be in the United States by now", Wintheiser said.

El-Hadidi and other disappointed applicants said they checked with US-based law firms and received assurances about the integrity of the programme. As a result, some of them resigned their jobs, sold their houses or other property, beefed up their bank accounts and even started saying goodbye to family and friends.

But their dreams were shattered when they were informed by embassy officials that they would not be getting an entry visa. "One of the points that really needs to be made clear is that winning the lottery does not guarantee you a visa", said Wintheiser. "The letter sent to applicants states that very clearly. It says that it (winning) does not guarantee that the visa will be issued." Those who were turned down were provided with written explanations. The reasons varied from lack of sufficient funds to support the applicant in the US to lack of education or skills, he said.

According to Wintheiser, the "congratulatory" letter explicitly advises applicants against taking drastic action such as resigning their jobs or selling their houses. It also tells them that they should

not start making travel arrangements, as there would be enough time if they were given a visa.

After receiving this initial letter, applicants have to send some more documents to the National Visa Centre. The centre then notifies them if they are eligible for an interview at the US Embassy. In the interview, candidates should be able to convince the consular official that they would not become a liability after entering the US — in other words, they must prove they are capable of supporting themselves without government assistance.

"We did all of that", Ragheh insisted. "I even called the National Visa Centre to make sure that they had my papers and that all was going well. The interview also went fine. All I was asked to do was to put more money in my bank account, which I did."

As the embassy works on the second batch of DV applicants, for the fiscal year 1995-1996, it is considering translating all the documents and letters involved in the process into Arabic. "Also, based on our experience, we have suggested to the National Visa Centre that they should make the wording of the initial letter even clearer", said Wintheiser.

Meanwhile, El-Hadidi and other unsuccessful applicants are not giving up. They said they would apply again, whatever the emotional and financial cost.

Edited by Wadie Kirolos

Market-price rents and free desert lands made real estate and desert developers happy last week, but the opposition was less thrilled. Gamal Essam El-Din reports from the People's Assembly

Rent ceilings broken

Acting with surprising speed, the People's Assembly last week passed a controversial and long-awaited amendment to the housing law, liberalising new apartment leasing contracts from rent restrictions imposed by the existing housing law.

The government hopes that dismantling rent controls will encourage apartment owners to open up an estimated two million flats which they have opted to leave empty rather than rent under the constraints of the old law. Previously, the housing law enabled tenants to rent flats indefinitely at limited rates, which were not subject to increase.

Under a number of old laws, passed in the 1950s and '60s, the government was given the right to fix and reduce rental values, chasing away private investors who wanted to build for renting.

The housing crisis was exacerbated in the '70s and '80s after a new law was passed determining the annual rent accrued from an apartment building to be equal to 7 per cent of the land and building value.

According to the People's Assembly's Housing Committee report on the new amendment, this is low compared to about 17 per cent interest on state treasury bills. As a result, a considerable number of people in major cities now pay under-valued rents for spacious apartments. Rents for old apartments with a view of the Nile, for example, range from LE4 to LE5 per month, while the rental value of one room flats in low-income communities on the fringes of Cairo are as high as LE50 a month.

Moreover, the fact that these old laws gave sitting tenants the right to pass on their flats to their immediate relatives who can prove they have lived with the tenant in the same apartment, forcing owners of new apartment buildings to leave flats empty for years, opting not to let them to tenants for fear of never regaining possession of them.

According to the parliamentary report, the old laws were also a major reason behind discouraging landlords to conduct any repairs or maintenance work in their rented buildings, a fact which led to the rapid deterioration of many old buildings in major cities. According to the report, the earthquake which hit Egypt in October 1992 highlighted the deteriorating condition of these old buildings.

Under the new law, rents will be fixed according to an agreement between the owner and

the tenant and will be subject to the market forces of supply and demand.

During the parliamentary discussions, the amendments did not please Islamist-oriented MP Ali Fathi El-Bab who argued that the new law will lead to higher rents at the expense of limited-income classes who will find greater difficulty in leasing housing units.

Arguing that the lack of low-cost housing is the core of the housing problem, independent MP Ahmed Taha charged that the move to liberalise rents reflects "a new government departure from commitment to meeting the socio-economic needs of the overwhelming majority."

Rasaf Seif, speaking for the leftist Tagammu party, charged that the amendment provides

only a partial solution to the housing problem. "This law does not say anything new about the solutions to the housing problem from which youth, limited-income classes and residents of slum areas suffer," said Seif.

The government, supporting the law as part of a concerted move to lure private sector investment in housing, nevertheless reiterated its commitment to low-income housing.

Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri said while the new law opens the door for fresh real estate investments, the government will continue to subsidise and finance low-rent housing. Ganzouri said that budget allocations in the 1992-1997 five year plan provided for low-cost housing have so far reached LE7 billion.

In an interview with *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Mo-

hamed Mahmoud Ali Hassan, chairman of the Assembly's Housing Committee and the National Company for Building and Reconstruction, agreed that the law provides only a partial solution to the housing problem. "The housing crisis in Egypt is not merely a problem of low rents, but it is also a problem of complicated building procedures and other conflicting laws that still discourage the private sector from investing in housing," said Hassan, emphasising that his Housing Committee is in the process of preparing a comprehensive law on housing in Egypt.

Hassan's committee asked the Housing Ministry, the Local Administration Ministry, the Housing Company and the Syndicate of Engineers to offer suggestions for a solution to the problem. He added that three draft laws on the landlord-tenant relationship were submitted by three deputies of the Assembly. These draft laws, which were referred by the Assembly's Speaker Ahmed Fathi Souror to the Assembly's Proposals and Complaints Committee, call for deregulating the old landlord-tenant relationship through raising gradually the rents of flats in old buildings.

For example, Hassan explained, the law submitted by independent MP Abdel-Moneim El-Otmani calls for a periodical increase of the rents of old buildings every five years: buildings constructed before January 1944 are to be raised by 40 per cent, those from 1 January 1944 to 5 November 1961 by 20 per cent, from 5 November 1961 to 9 October 1973 by 20 per cent, from 9 October 1973 to 9 September 1977 by 10 per cent, and from 9 September 1977 to date by 5 per cent.

According to Talaat Mustafa, a major private contractor and the committee's deputy chairman, the new amendment provides an incomplete solution to the housing problem. Mustafa believes there is a pressing need to amend law 106 of 1976 which regulates building works. According to Mustafa, this law forces investors to go through a maze of complicated, expensive and protracted bureaucratic measures to finally get a building licence.

"To construct a new building in Cairo, for example, you need the approval of 37 authorities and must pay 24 different kinds of fees," said Mustafa. He emphasised that exorbitant fees are another major reason for the spiral rise in flat prices in Cairo and other major cities, further complicating the housing crisis in Egypt.

Desert lands for free

IN AN attempt to direct investors towards reclaiming desert land and setting up new housing communities, last week the People's Assembly passed a new law enabling the government to give investors state-owned desert land on a free-of-charge basis or against "token" leases.

The law is part of the government's strategy to encourage private investors, both local and foreign, to establish new projects and create employment opportunities.

"The government will be providing the necessary infrastructure to support urban development," stated Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri.

Made up of six articles, the law regulates the disposition of state-owned desert lands on a free-of-charge basis or against "token" rents for carrying out investment projects.

President Hosni Mubarak is expected to issue a decree determining the locations and the total area of these desert lands and the procedures according

to which they will be distributed. "The area of the desert land will be provided according to the size and nature of each investment project and the value of its invested capital. The investor will be eligible to own the land only after completion of the project and its operation."

According to the law, the leasing period of the designated lands can be extended to 40 years as long as the project is in operation. In case the investor fails to start operation within the period designated by the presidential decree, the government agency will be entitled to recover the land. The government may also sell or rent it to the investor according to market prices.

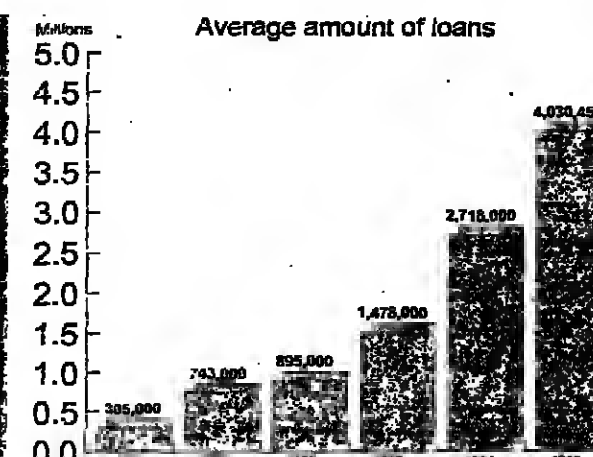
The law prohibits the use of the land for purposes other than those it was originally allocated for.

Independent MP Ahmed Taha expressed his fears that these lands might be used as a dumping area for the nuclear waste of foreign countries.

However, Kamal El-Shazli, Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, vehemently dismissed Taha's fears, saying the law is mainly designed to encourage the establishment of new desert communities.

MP Mohamed Abdel-Aziz Shaban, of the left-wing Tagammu Party, also expressed fears that the law would permit foreigners to control large areas of Egyptian lands. He demanded that the distribution of this land be confined to Egyptians only.

Taha also called upon the government to prevent foreigners from owning any land in Sinai. Newly-appointed Finance Minister Mohammed El-Gharib indicated that the investment projects which will be established on these desert lands include both agricultural and industrial schemes, emphasising that the state will not approve allocating any desert lands to investors unless their projects are supported by feasibility studies showing the type and size of the project.



Lending for growth

MORE than five years have passed since the implementation of the Small and Micro Enterprise (SMEP) project in Alexandria. The project has provided 59,580 new job opportunities since its establishment in 1990 by the Alexandria Businessmen's Association (ABA). These were made possible by the extension of LE122 million in credit to 20,991 establishments.

The project was designed to increase the economic output of the small enterprise sector, contribute to solving the unemployment problem, and raise individuals' standard of living.

The SMEP specialises in lending funds to micro enterprises of five or less employees and small enterprises of six to 15 employees. Originally, the manufacturing and processing sectors were the primary targets of SMEP. However, this later expanded to include the service and trade sectors. SMEP products include garments and ready-made clothing; leather, wood, metal, glass, lampshades and plastic products; spice grinding and prepared foods.

Average loan sizes range between LE1,000-3,000 for micro enterprises and LE5,000-25,000 for small enterprises. Repayment is due within 4-12 months for loans intended as working capital and within 18 months for loans used to buy fixed assets.

The project is currently extending more than 1,500 loans per month.

SMEP came into existence thanks to a grant agreement signed between the ABA and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1989. USAID pledged \$10 million for the project over a seven-year period. The total amount of the grant is deposited in local banks and is used as a collateral to take out loans needed for project start-up.

Beer bids

THE HOLDING Company for Housing, Tourism and Cinema (HCHTC) last week opened two bids to buy a majority stake in its wholly-owned subsidiary Al-Ahram Beverages Company (ABC), the sole producer of beer in Egypt, reports Shereen Abdel-Razek.

The bids were submitted by two Egyptian consortiums — a public sector group comprising the Holding Company for Food Industries, Misr Insurance Company and National Bank of Egypt, offering to buy 90 per cent of ABC on a cash basis; and a consortium including Egyptian Finance Company and Al-Ahly Development and Investment, which offered to buy 70 per cent of ABC on a mixed cash-lease basis.

Mohamed Bakir, manager of the privatisation sector at HCHTC, said the holding company is still considering the bids. HCHTC has been considering different bids for selling ABC for two years, added Bakir. He attributed the holding company's caution to ABC's excellent financial position and its valuable assets.

He pointed out that the holding company hopes to find an "anchor investor" with the know-how to develop ABC production to international standards.

ABC has a paid-in capital of LE90 million and its total assets were valued at LE221.5 million in 1995, compared to LE198 million the previous year. It posted a pre-tax profit of LE60.5 during fiscal 1994/5 with a 24 per cent increase over the previous year.

Cairo hosts bank talks

THE MIDDLE East Development Bank will move one step closer to being a reality when the task force on financing mechanisms for economic development in the Middle East and North Africa meets in Cairo on 13-14 February. The task force will meet to finalise a draft action plan for a transition team, made up of around nine experts, to oversee organisational work for the establishment of the Middle East Bank.

The team, which will be based in Cairo, will also oversee the early start-up of a forum for economic cooperation which will begin work before the bank opens in 1997.

It is expected that the bank will assist the private sector and help finance small and medium-sized infrastructure projects in the region such as water, transport and communications. Nominees for the bank's presidency have not yet been put forward. However, there are reports that it will be an American.

Middle Eastern states hold more than 20 per cent of the shares of the Bank. Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, each hold 4 per cent, while Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia hold 2 per cent each. Outside the region, Japan holds 9.5 per cent, Russia 6, Italy 5, the Netherlands 3.5, Canada 2.5, Greece 2, Austria 1, and Turkey 1. Major European and Gulf countries are yet to contribute.

ETR offer

THE PUBLIC offering of 1,085 million shares of the Egyptian Company for Tourist Resorts (ETR), managed by the National Bank of Egypt (NBE), was 1.25 times oversubscribed last week. The LE108.5 million issue comprised 31 per cent of the company's shares and was offered at LE100 a share.

ETR is a new joint venture company with a paid-in capital of LE350 million. The main target of the company's establishment is to set up a tourist resort on the Red Sea. NBE owns 9 per cent of ETR shares compared to the 15 per cent stake held by ETR's major shareholder Al-Rowad Tourism.

Better deal in Kuwait

Egyptian workers abroad will receive added support from joint Kuwaiti and Egyptian efforts to improve their conditions. Reem Loila reports

Hardly a day goes by without local newspapers reporting tragic accounts of the problems Egyptian workers face in other Arab countries. In many cases, labour law violations and illegal contracts are to blame for their misfortunes.

In an attempt to improve conditions for Egyptian workers in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, and the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Immigration are co-ordinating efforts to establish new procedures and regulations.

According to the latest statistics from the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Immigration, the total number of Egyptian workers in Kuwait is 180,000. This figure has grown considerably since before the Gulf War when there were only 150,000 Egyptian workers in Kuwait. This increase in numbers is attributed to the fact that after the war, Egyptians replaced workers of other nationalities who were dismissed because of their home countries' support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

According to Adel El-Dowlati, labour attaché at the Egyptian embassy in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government has decided to post a labour attaché to their embassy in Cairo. The Kuwaiti labour office will help alleviate workers' problems by informing the Egyptian authorities of Kuwaiti labour market conditions and ensuring the legality of contracts.

"It is hoped that better and more direct co-ordination will put an end to forged and illegal contracts," said El-Dowlati. Both the Egyptian

and Kuwaiti governments have agreed to establish joint employment offices to provide Egyptian workers with legitimate contracts.

Abdel-Rahman Mohamed, press counselor at the Kuwaiti embassy in Cairo, said, "These offices must be aware of developments in the Kuwaiti job market through advertisements, for example, seeking workers in certain fields. This will provide job opportunities through legitimate channels."

Kuwait has also issued a new law imposing more severe penalties on employers who violate labour laws and regulations. Some employers have been known to take advantage of a worker's desperate financial situation by offering jobs without contracts. "This is completely against the law, as it deprives workers of their rights," asserted Mohamed.

According to Abdel-Qader El-Assar, counselor of international cooperation at the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Immigration, the Kuwaiti authorities have reconsidered the status of Egyptian workers. By setting a minimum level of wages for each job, the Kuwaiti government hopes to guard against arbitrary payment.

To improve social conditions for low-income workers, El-Assar noted that the Kuwaiti government has already built better housing for workers, some of whom still live in tin shacks.

News of better housing comes as a relief to Abdel-Qawi Ibrahim, an Egyptian fisherman who works in Kuwait. "I am almost homeless. I live in a tin shack," explained Ibrahim, "I have

to work under very bad conditions and weather, so the very least of my rights should be to live in a decent house."

Workers' lack of awareness about their rights makes them vulnerable to a multitude of problems. Many have complained that employers changed the terms of their employment contract to their own advantage. The Ministry of Manpower and Immigration has received repeated complaints from workers who were deceived by their guarantors, those who take legal responsibility for employees' presence in Kuwait. Kuwait law requires foreign workers to have Kuwaiti "guarantors". In most cases, the employers are the guarantors. Employees have alleged that their guarantors, in order to avoid paying their end-of-service indemnities, accuse them of theft and on some occasions have them incarcerated.

"Forged and temporary contracts are another major problem. Usually, these contracts lack insurance or financial guarantees, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the law," said El-Assar.

Due to such faulty contracts, an Egyptian cook working in Kuwait was unable to collect his back wages from his guarantor. He filed a case for compensation against the Egyptian embassy on the grounds that it had failed to protect him. But the court ruled that the case was outside its jurisdiction.

"I cannot understand what has happened, and what is the meaning of 'outside its jurisdiction'," said the cook, Ibrahim Mohamed. "I just want my rights and money. The embassy told me that the contract has some items that deny me all my rights. I know nothing about these items. I just want my money."

According to Saqr El-Bajjani, head of the Kuwait Information Centre, all workers in Kuwait, especially Egyptians, enjoy their rights. But as in any country, some people violate the law, and this exposes them to several problems. Some workers who are not technically or professionally prepared, enter Kuwait illegally. With no legal backing, they are exposed to forged, illegal, and temporary contracts.

"These workers burden the Kuwaiti labour market, and stain the good reputation of Egyptian workers. I believe that the new procedures will solve all the workers' problems," added El-Bajjani.

In a recent interview with *Al-Kuwait*, a monthly bulletin published by the Kuwaiti Information Centre in Cairo, Minister of Manpower and Immigration Ahmed El-Amin said, "The Kuwaiti government was keen to provide Egyptians with all their rights. It has issued a new law to regulate the Egyptian workers' status. This law will guarantee their rights, as well as provide great facilities for those who work in Kuwait."

El-Amin also has stressed the importance of having a Kuwaiti labour embassy. "I have noticed enhanced cooperation on the part of the Kuwaiti government in efforts to solve the problems of the Egyptians," commented the minister.

Photo: Mohamed Laili

Migrant workers victimised by the whim of unscrupulous employers often found themselves back where they started

Market report

Chemicals lead the plunge

ONCE again the General Capital Market Index took a turn for the worse. For the week ending Thursday 1 February, it lost 4.93 points, ending at 210.61. The volume of dealings decreased, ending at LE60.5 million compared to LE61.8 million the previous week.

The Manufacturing Sector shouldered the bulk of the loss: its index fell back by 8.76 points, settling at 267.43 points. This decline is attributed to the plunge in the share value of 11 companies. Paints and Chemical Industries witnessed the biggest setback, losing LE40.50 and ending at LE609.5. Portland Torsch Cement closed at LE43 compared to LE48.2 at the beginning of the week.

North Cairo Mills emerged as the star market player. Following the announcement of its LE60 million profits during the 1995-1996 fiscal year, its shares gained LE6.28 each, an 8.49 per cent increase, ending at LE80.28. Alexandria Portland Cement ended LE3 higher than its opening price, closing at LE33.3.

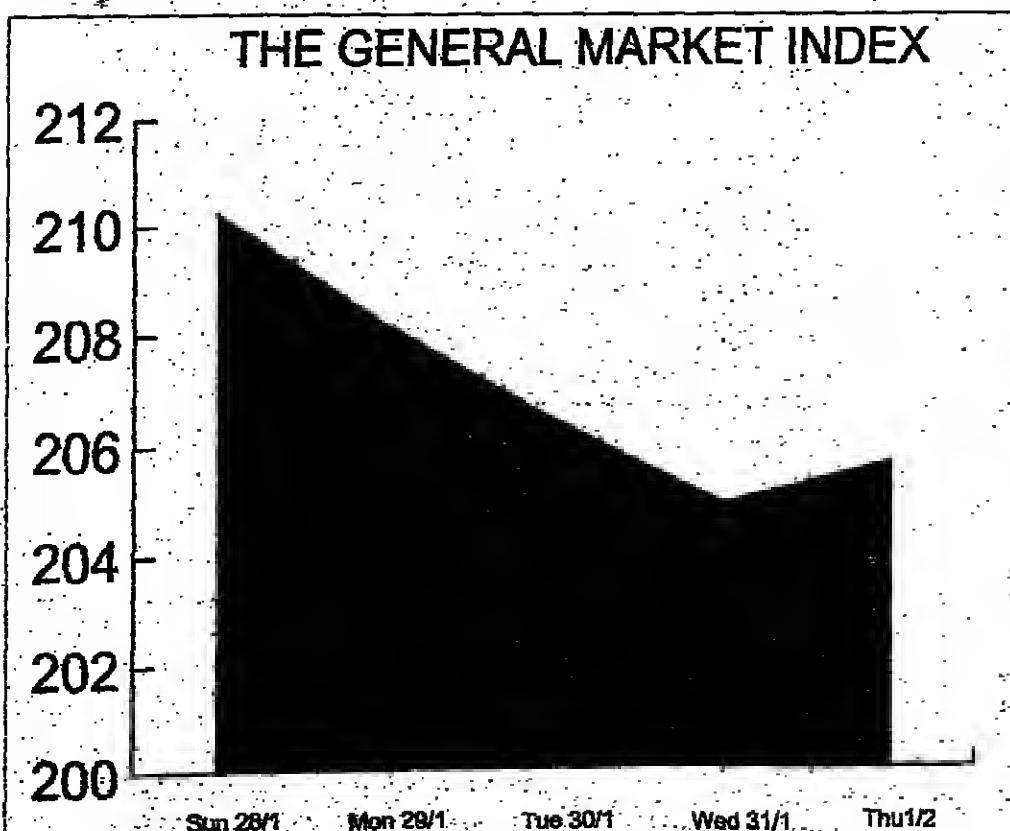
The shares of Suez Cement took 20.75 per cent of all market transactions as 73,408 of its shares changed hands. The company gained LE0.04 and closed at LE42.2.

The financial sector experienced another bad week with the shares of five companies losing ground. The sector's index plunged by 2.2 points to end at 219.89 points. Shares of the Commercial International Bank (CIB) continued plummeting, despite a short-lived recovery in the middle of the week, to reach LE450 by the end of the week. Misr International Bank (MIB) also lost LE3.45 and closed at LE26.1.

Treasury Bonds 2000 dominated the market and generated the highest value of trading by acquiring 62.04 per cent of the value of total market transactions. The total value of traded bonds reached LE41.13 million and the closing price was LE1,085 with an increase of LE4.9.

On the whole, the shares of 15 companies ended higher than their opening value, while 20 witnessed a decline and 21 remained stable.

Edited by Ghada Ragab



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The refusal by the Israeli Health Ministry to use their blood donations for fear of AIDS brought Ethiopian Jews onto the streets to protest against Israeli racism (photo AFP)

Broken promises

Admittance to the promised land has not lived up to expectations for Israel's Ethiopian community, reports Julie Till

Fury over the discarding of Ethiopian blood donations by the Israeli Health Ministry spilled over onto the street last week. The violence of the demonstration outside the Israeli prime minister's office, during which 22 protesters and 40 policemen were injured, showed the depth of feeling over the decision to systematically destroy the blood donated by this group.

Israeli Health Minister Ephraim Sneh justified the policy of the Israeli Central Blood Bank by noting that the incidence of AIDS among immigrants from Ethiopia is 50 times higher than among other Israelis. But how can such a comparison be made, asks Yossi Swartz, an Israeli political activist who works with Ethiopian community organisations, when the rate for Israeli society as a whole is unknown. Swartz explained that only Ethiopian immigrants are subjected to mandatory AIDS tests. The huge influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union has not been subjected to the same examination, nor have native-born Israelis.

"According to Israeli health policy every Ethiopian has to undergo physical tests including an AIDS test. We know exactly how many Ethiopians have AIDS, but we don't know the rate for Israeli society as a whole. The Ash-

kenazi (Western) Israelis prefer to use private clinics because they don't want the authorities informed."

But the outburst of anger was not simply a reaction to the disclosure of what happened to the blood samples. It is a cumulative response to years of discrimination and racism. According to Michael Warschawski, a director of the Alternative Information Centre in Jerusalem, their plight is in part due to "classic anti-black racism. White Jews cannot relate to them. This is demonstrated in housing, in schools and even at the swimming pool."

It is not simply a question of colour. Culture plays a crucial part. Like the *Mizrachi* (Oriental) Jews before them, Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel with a suitcase brimming with clothes, music, food and language which bore little resemblance to the cultural baggage of the *Ashkenazi* who founded Israel and still dominate it, economically and politically. This diverse heritage has had little chance to unpack itself. According to Warschawski, in Israeli schools "there is only one history, the history of Western Judaism".

Unsurprisingly, Ethiopians have fared badly in this culturally-coded educational system. Swartz describes how a high percentage of Ethiopians were placed in special schools or classes for those with learning disabilities on the basis of their

low performance in school IQ tests. However, last year the Ministry of Education financed another set of tests, this time based on an international system of assessing learning potential. Its recommendation was that many of these students had been wrongly diagnosed and should be put back into mainstream schools and classes. The original IQ tests had been as much a test of culture — that is to say *Ashkenazi* culture — as intelligence.

The 56,000 strong Ethiopian community has found itself sharing the poorer districts of large cities and the economically neglected "development towns" with its North African neighbours. Some of them, says Israeli intellectual and human rights activist Israel Shahak, are still living in the caravans provided as temporary accommodation for those swept up in two airlifts from war-torn Ethiopia, Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991.

This, says Shahak, should be compared to the privileges that Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union receive. "Russian immigrants receive \$22,000 for absorption, Ethiopians receive nothing." Moreover, Ethiopian parents have no right to choose what kind of state school they send their children to. "With the agreement of all the Zionist parties, Likud and Labour, Ethiopian children have to go to religious schools. They cannot choose between the re-

ligious and secular streams." The reason, argues Shahak, is the belief that "they have to be educated in Judaism".

It is the question mark over the Jewishness of Ethiopian immigrants which lies at the heart of the matter. They are regarded as "doubtful Jews" by Israel's rabbinical orthodoxy and this scepticism is accepted by the government, whatever political colours its sports. To become full Jews, explains Warschawski, they have to undergo conversion "even though they consider themselves as Jews".

Ethiopian rabbis, although allowed to perform certain religious rites, cannot conduct marriage services for members of their own community. There is a specified, select number of Orthodox rabbis who undertake this task, which includes an investigation of the couple's family background to ensure its Jewishness. As there are no secular marriages in Israel, rabbinical approval is crucial. But, says Warschawski, "No one is checking the Jewish origins of European immigrants in the way that Ethiopians are being checked out."

Yet Jewish racism, explains Shahak, is not built fundamentally on skin colour. "There are black Jews from the south of India, recognised by the rabbis, who are not affected by this legal discrimination." Israel's apartheid system is not like the one that existed in South Africa, which was based on being white

or black. Instead, argues Shahak, "It is a horrifying discrimination against all non-Jews, black, white or yellow." The difference is that "you can become a Jew".

For example, says Shahak, "if a Korean converted to Judaism he could decide to come and settle in Kiryat Arba (a Jewish settlement near Hebron) and get a lot of money from the government for doing so. But an Arab could not live in Hebron without government permission first. Nor could a Christian Korean or a Korean Buddhist."

The chances of getting such permission, if you are not Jewish, are negligible. Despite the fact that 85 per cent of the Israeli public regards itself as secular, the political philosophy on which the state was built has inescapable religious consequences.

"Zionism," says Shahak, "was founded on the belief that land acquired by Jews, whether by conquest or through purchase, can only be used by Jews." Compare this to state, or federal, land in the US, he suggests. "There, land was taken from native Americans. It does not matter how the point is that it is now open for anyone to live and open a business on federal land. But in Israel only Jews can live on state land." Admittance to the promised land, it seems, is a highly selective affair.

In spite of Oslo

By Azmi Bishara

Apart from the ceiling imposed by the Oslo agreement, the salient feature of the Palestinian legislative council elections was the absence of political parties. The Palestinian movement has always been marked by numerous political factions with diverse ideological orientations. Also, there has always been a strong desire for politics to affect and regulate social life, in the form of occupational, youth and women's organisations and the like. This reality, regardless of one's attitude towards it, makes the absence of political parties in the first Palestinian elections since the polling for the Jordanian parliament in 1957 all the more striking.

In spite of the crisis of Palestinian political parties, which is a result of the crisis of the Palestinian national liberation movement in general and of the crisis facing the ideological left worldwide as far as Palestinian left-wing factions are concerned, the opposition's decision to boycott the elections is largely responsible for the absence of party lists in the elections. The boycott has had far-reaching effects, not just on the electoral process itself, but on the composition and future efficacy of the national council. The opposition has forfeited the only opportunity to generate a vital legislative council, within the confines of the Oslo agreement, and under a dominant Palestinian National Authority which tolerates little opposition within its own ranks.

The Palestinian factions had created novel institutions that had, for some time, succeeded to a great extent in neutralising inherited social structures. Their absence from the political arena, whether voluntarily or by coercion, has helped to reassert the role of traditional social values and institutions. This was manifested clearly during the elections, where the long-reflecting pre-Oslo tribalism of the tribe and extended family and other such traditional affiliations. The system of electoral districts also contributed to limiting the political not to mention the ideological choices. Elections without choice are a contradiction in terms, although evidently people learn to live with such contradictions.

The Palestinians have chosen not to turn their backs on the elections. They rejected the opposition's call for a boycott on the grounds that the elections are a part of the Oslo agreement and contribute to legitimising it. Nevertheless, the fact that the Palestinians did participate does not constitute a vote for the Oslo agreement, as Shimon Peres would have it. The most we can say is that the Palestinians accepted the elections as part of a given political reality — the peace process: not that they have accepted all the terms and conditions of that process.

The Palestinians have found numerous ways of expressing their independent will, in spite of the lack of choices. They cast their votes for candidates with a record of political integrity, in spite of their criticism of the current political process. Haidar Abdel-Shafi, in Gaza and Abdel-Jawad Saleh in Ramallah, for example, won in their districts by large majorities. Also, there was considerable support for Fatah activists who ran as independents, in spite of the heavy concentration of influence and wealth in the hands of the Palestinian National Authority, which has vir-

nal creation over political appointments and the threat.

These voters demonstrate that the results of the elections were not a foregone conclusion. The opposition could have contested the elections, particularly if it had rallied around independent political figures with an honourable past, and many opposition candidates could well have won seats on the Palestinian council. In fact, one could have imagined that, in the elections, the National Democrats (uniting the left-wing parties) and the National Authority.

Within the context of the peace process, the Palestinian council could have some potential to counter total Israeli domination. It could re-formulate a Palestinian opposition whose will is not totally derived from the spirit of Oslo, reflecting the broader aspirations of the Palestinian people. A strong nationalist bloc within the council would have considerable impact on the negotiations for a final settlement. The opposition should have realised that.

During the coming phase, the Palestinian council has three tasks before it. Firstly, it must monitor the intimacy of Israeli-Palestinian relations, in which a virtual mandate over Palestinian politics makes an Israeli VIP card, permitting passage between the West Bank and Gaza, a dream for Palestinian politicians. This task involves ensuring the highest level of openness in the forthcoming negotiations.

Secondly, it must create a system of checks and balances to counter the high concentration of authority in the hands of a single individual, to offset executive power, and to subject the growing security apparatus to civilian control and scrutiny. In other words, it must work to evolve democratic institutions, at least in so far as they affect the day-to-day lives of the people. It will be the task of the diverse popular forces to call the council to account on that basis. Finally, it must seek to promote as much as possible the expression of Palestinian sovereignty.

There is no contradiction between the national task of confronting the Oslo restrictions and the Israeli mandate and the need to build an enlightened democratic political life for the Palestinians, with a modern system to administer it. In fact, the Palestinian national council will be vital in this regard. Perhaps the opposition can still find an appropriate format — perhaps in cooperation with some of the independents who were elected to the council — to take part in meeting this challenge. It is not in the interests of the Palestinian people for the opposition to turn its back on the current realities as it did towards the elections. There is still opportunity to ensure that the new council is fully accountable and performs the tasks before it to the best of its ability, even if this is still a far cry from the exercise of national sovereignty.

The writer is a professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University, in the West Bank, and a member of the board of the Ramallah-based *Moutan* non-governmental organisation.

Rogues tolerated no more

America rules the roost and Khartoum's vagaries have come home to roost, writes Gamal Nkrumah

These days every silver lining is chased away by dark clouds as far as Sudan is concerned. Trade between Sudan and its traditional trading partners in the region — Egypt, Ethiopia and Kenya — has been reduced to a trickle. Observers note that relations between Sudan and Libya are cool. Iran is in no position to assist Sudan financially and Khartoum has sacrificed its economic links with the oil-rich Arab Gulf states by supporting Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. That leaves only Islamist-oriented tycoons like Saudi businessman Osama Bin Laden to prop up the regime. Indeed, Bin Laden is known to finance grandiose agricultural, industrial and commercial projects in Sudan. He is not the only wealthy Islamist sympathiser to invest in Sudan.

Alone among its neighbours, Sudan teatiously conforms to old patterns and outdated anti-imperialist posturing. While all Sudan's neighbours save Libya refused to grant entry visas to Nation of Islam head Louis Farrakhan, the controversial African American leader was fêted in Khartoum. Vested interests in Ghana in West Africa, Sudan in East Africa, and Libya in North Africa have emerged as the cornerstones of a Nation of Islam budding business empire in Africa. Cash-strapped and politically isolated nations like Sudan have become a haven for Islamist magnates with an anti-American agenda.

As Farrakhan was touring Africa, Madeleine Albright, US permanent representative to the UN, was also in the continent. No doubt they had radically different rosters. Albright avoided Farrakhan like the plague. She dodged the African capitals he toured as the State Department made sure that their itineraries did not cross. Needless to say, Farrakhan visited Khartoum and Tripoli and Albright did not. She headed for Cairo, Kigali, Asmara and Addis Ababa among other places. Farrakhan's trip to Khartoum came shortly after US Ambassador to Khartoum Tim Carney left the country to set up shop in Nairobi, the capital of neighbouring Kenya.

Washington has twice before reduced the number of American staff in Sudan — in 1993 and in 1986, when the US bombing of Tripoli, Libya, raised alarm bells for the safety of US nationals in a wave of regional anti-American hysteria. In the past two instances, American diplomats in Khartoum were moved to Nairobi.

The *Washington Post* claimed that Libya had donated \$1 billion to Farrakhan's cause, when the latter met Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi last week in Tripoli before visiting Sudan. Libya denied the newspaper's claims and countered that Farrakhan and Gaddafi discussed how to strengthen the voice of America's "oppressed racial and religious minorities" — including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Muslims and Arab Americans — before the next presidential elections. Libya's official JANA news agency painted a picture of the US as a nation that "represses freedom, is against human rights and self-determination" and claimed that it "practices all forms of terrorism against its black nationals".

The US Justice Department promptly demanded a full explanation from Farrakhan. US federal law stip-

ulates that American citizens or organisations who liaise with foreign governments with the aim of influencing domestic politics in America must register their intentions first with the US government. America's Central Intelligence Agency and the US Justice Department have begun extensive investigations into Farrakhan's recent trips to Libya and Sudan.

The American measures come at a time when African nations are stepping up pressure against Khartoum. Sudan is not a member of the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) Conflict Resolution Mechanism. Yet the UN Security Council resolution urges Khartoum to report back to the OAU concerning the whereabouts of the three Egyptians suspected of carrying out the assassination attempt on President Hosni Mubarak in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa last June. Sudan charged that the Americans were pressuring African nations to harass Khartoum. Sudan's neighbours deny the charge.

Strong ethnic affiliations between the Nilotic peoples of southern Sudan and their kith and kin in neighbouring states ensure that southerners enjoy the overwhelming support of other East African nations. Assigning Arab names to non-Arab children from Nuba Mountain and southern Sudan, enslaving villagers in non-Muslim areas and forcing them to convert to Islam have incensed the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), secessionists and sympathisers with the southern Sudanese cause in neighbouring states. "I'm not even sure they are Muslim, but they use Islam to cling to power," Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said last week, referring to the ruling clique in Khartoum. Kampala broke relations with Khartoum early last year. "President Omar Al-Bashir says that he can recruit a million people. I've got two million militiamen who are already combat trained," Museveni warned.

"By using diplomacy where we can and force where we must," US President Bill Clinton said in his 23 January State of the Union address, America could be the world's "best peacemaker". He warned that unless the US arrested threats to world peace today, "we will suffer the consequences of our neglect tomorrow".

"Our leadership in the world is strong, bringing new hope for peace," Clinton boasted. America stands poised to root out "terrorism, ethnic and religious hatred and aggression by rogue states," he warned.

On 1 February, the American State Department issued a statement urging the 2,100 US citizens residing in Sudan to leave the country. With some 350 aid workers and an unspecified number of American spouses of Sudanese nationals living in Sudan, the US is on the war path even though Khartoum owes resorts to less risky and harder-to-detect escapades in its ideological battle with America.

Lieutenant General Omar Hassan Al-Bashir assumed power in 1989. His regime has vowed to implement the so-called "Islamic Civilisation Project" at home and export its ideology abroad. The war in southern Sudan costs an estimated \$2 million per day. A definite link between deteriorating social and economic conditions and the intensification of the war in southern Sudan exists. Sudan's Foreign Minister Ali Oth-

man Mohamed Taha explained recently that even though the Sudanese opposition's priority was to topple the government of Bashir, the regime's priority was to defend Sudan's territorial integrity and to bring the war in the south of the country to an end.

The Sudanese opposition retorts that war, the obliteration of democratic practice and a dramatic increase in violations of human rights constitute the bone of contention between them and the ruling junta.

In 1993, Sudan was blacklisted by the US State Department as a country sponsoring international terrorism. However, the State Department emphasised that its action did not entail a severing of international relations between the two countries. Softening overtures by Sudanese officials have failed to break the logjam in American-Sudanese relations.

Foreign Minister Taha was a former deputy head of the ruling National Islamic Front. Washington contends that militant members of Egypt's Gama'a Islamiya and Islamists from Ethiopia and Eritrea have found refuge in Sudan. The three countries concerned also charge that Sudan sheltered fugitives from justice. "Why did Ethiopia demand that Sudan repatriate the three suspects 32 days after the assassination attempt on Mubarak?" Taha protested. The Sudanese demand of parliamentary reform, Shaker Al-Siraj, put it more bluntly. "Washington is involved in a conspiracy against Sudan," he said over the weekend. "The UN Security Council was subjected to high pressure to issue a resolution against Sudan."

The Security Council unanimously requested Khartoum to hurry to extradite the three Egyptian suspects in last year's Addis Ababa attack. The US suspended all economic assistance except for humanitarian relief. Egypt, along with most of Sudan's neighbours, are ultimately reluctant to back the imposition of comprehensive sanctions against Khartoum as that would jeopardise the well-being of the Sudanese people and threaten the territorial integrity of Sudan, which would inevitably endanger Egyptian security interests. The US has no such qualms.

The American-based Human Rights Watch warned recently that children in southern Sudan were being abducted by the warring factions — the government forces, local Arab tribesmen militias, the SPLA and the Southern Sudan Independence Army. The UN Children's Fund said that the SPLA refused to cooperate with its family reunification programmes.

The UN Economic and Social Council, the UN Commission on Human Rights and Amnesty International have all issued statements condemning the regime in Khartoum, which is fighting a war that has resulted in the death of an estimated 1.5 million Sudanese and the displacement of some five million southern Sudanese, and contributed to declining living standards and deteriorating living conditions. Sudan's overall infant mortality rate of 150 per 1,000 is now among the world's highest. The displaced people of southern Sudan cannot yet return to rebuild their battered homes and shattered lives. Their country's pariah status can only make matters worse.

Ghost democracy

By Mahgoub Othman

It is neither a luxury nor a purely academic exercise to discuss democracy and human rights. They are two fundamental issues in our world today that must not be ignored. No country can afford to trivialise democratic practice — and Sudan is no exception. But, Sudan cannot get away with simply paying lip service to democracy. It cannot invent a Sudanese version of it.

The International Bill of Human Rights — drafted three years after the inception of the United Nations, half a century ago — and subsequent human rights accords — serve as a fully fledged human rights constitution which should be respected by all. The denial and violation of human rights, tarnish the reputation of states. A number of developed countries have declared their stance: to deny financial and economic assistance to any government which is proven to commit violations of human rights.

As a system of government, democracy is the collateral of human rights. Human rights can only be exercised in a democratic society in which people are not ruled against their will. Thus, the yardstick for any democracy is the extent to which human rights are exercised and vice versa.

These thoughts about democracy have been occasioned by the statements made by the rulers in Khartoum regarding the forthcoming Sudanese general elections scheduled to take place in March this year. The elections, they claim, are proof of Sudan's respect for human rights — a gross lie which should not deceive anybody.

Sudan's human rights record is among the worst worldwide. The UN special rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, who paid several visits to the country in 1992 and 1994, has noted in his reports that there are innumerable proofs of human rights violations committed by the government in Khartoum.

Drawing on the reports of the special rapporteur and reports by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, Africa Rights and the London-based Human Rights Organisation for Sudan — and particularly reports published over the past three weeks — the steady succession of human rights violations in Sudan may be summarised as follows.

Since the 1989 coup d'état which brought the National Islamic Front (NIF), under Hassan Al-Turabi and Omar Al-Bashir, to power, Sudan has been placed under a state of emergency. Freedoms of opinion, expression and association have been denied, freedom of belief has been curbed and thousands of people have been subjected to arbitrary dismissal from civil or military service.

The government is pursuing a systematic policy of brutally cradling certain tribes living in the mountains of Nuba and in southern regions, suspicious that they may be giving support to the Sudan People's Liberation Army, whose militias under the leadership of John Garang, are still fighting raging battles against government forces.

Harassment, torture and out-of-court executions are the order of the day. The "tiger forces" where torture is regularly practised are still in place and the victims who suffer death or lasting psychological or physical injury number in the thousands. The latest form of torture is to break the arms of students who demonstrate in protest at deteriorating conditions.

Human rights organisations within the UN and non-governmental African organisations have condemned the situation in Sudan on several occasions. At its 12th session, the African Commission for the Rights of Individuals and Peoples deplored the human rights abuses. The United States and several European countries have blacklisted Sudan for its human rights violations and consequently withheld financial assistance, which had constituted one of Sudan's major foreign currency sources.

As a reaction to its regional and international isolation, the government of Khartoum is using the elections to deceive public opinion abroad, to improve its image and to alleviate its isolation.

In the wake of the attempt on the life of President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa last June, when the finger of accusation was pointed at Sudan, Khartoum removed and shuffled top security officials who had been associated with acts of brutality and torture. However, removing suspects from power has not deceived anybody, because the persons appointed in their place are also in NIF cadres and pursue the same abusive policies as their predecessors.

A new ploy to deceive world opinion is under way today. General elections will be held, but the regime remains unwilling to relinquish its single-handed rule or to accept suppression of the opposition. The elections are no proof that the repressive policies exercised by the present government over the last seven years are being dropped. Totalitarian rule can neither admit nor tolerate the exercise of human rights which are enshrined in international accords, since this would jeopardise the very existence of the regime.

The writer is a former minister of national guidance in Sudan and a leading member of the opposition.

Five years ago this month, on 23 February, the US-led allied forces launched their final drive to push Iraq out of Kuwait. The ground offensive lasted no more than three days. Hailed by President George Bush as the opening of a 'New World Order', the Gulf War delivered little beyond military triumph. Saddam's dictatorship remains solidly entrenched. Predictions of a new regional order based on democracy and cooperation failed to materialise. And meanwhile, the Iraqi people, having been 'bombed back to the middle ages', suffer unbearable hardship under futile and inhuman sanctions. Below, political analysts look back at the post-Gulf War years, and comment on American/UN Security Council policy on Iraq



An elderly Iraqi woman holds a 250 dinar bank note as she shops at a Baghdad vegetable and fruit market. Iraqi authorities have slashed public bus fares and food prices because of the rising dinar in anticipation of a fuel-for-food deal with the United Nations Security Council, long rejected by the regime of Saddam Hussein (photo:AFP)

Lessons that will not be learned

Five years have passed since the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait ended. In its wake great changes were forecast and indeed, in the last five years, the region has witnessed many developments, though none of them were predicted. The radical transformations we hoped for during and after the Gulf crisis have all failed to materialise. Yet still we appear to be determined not to take on board the lessons we should have learned during and following the invasion.

The last five years have witnessed an unprecedented decline in the region's political, economic and social structures. Perhaps we courted such punitive developments. Certainly, before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, we spent a great deal of time lamenting the passing of Arab nationalism. The ideals of pan-Arabism had been obscured by pragmatism, discredited by ongoing disputes between Iraq and Syria, and beleaguered by Western nations and their regional allies. In the seventies the concept of Arab nationalism was further devalued when it became a rallying cry whose sole purpose was to isolate Egypt, which had just concluded a peace treaty with Israel.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was simply the icing on the cake. When Iraq occupied Kuwait whatever residual appeal was exercised by the notion of Arab nationalism evaporated. Pan-Arabism was finally discredited. It, after all, had provided the impetus for Saddam Hussein's political philosophy, driving his armies southward, infusing the Iraqi regime's ludicrous rhetoric. Yet in our keenness to execute the scapegoat of Arab nationalism we lost sight of the fact that the Arab World was rapidly changing, and that three ideological trends were in the process

of emerging.

Regionally, the most insidious of these is the Islamicist movement. Here I am not simply referring to organised Islamist groups, but to a general and pervasive mood that makes a strong appeal to broad segments of a middle class that has seen a steady deterioration in standards of welfare and education. Secondly, there is a sub-regional revival of sectarian, ethnic and tribal affiliations. This development, while not entirely unexpected, has been of surprising proportions. In every Arab country that has an oppressed — or despotic — minority, tensions have exploded in alarmingly frequent outbursts of violence.

Thirdly, and very curiously, has been the revival of Arab nationalism itself, though it is now presented in a new guise, having become the official government response to foreign pressure or to other less tolerant ideologies. In its new garb Arab nationalism is less a call to Bismarckian unity than an attempt to provide a framework within which to coordinate inter-Arab efforts to resist other trends. Ironically those who now appeal to such nationalism are the same people who, in the past, were its most vociferous opponents.

These three ideologies have emerged at a time when the regional order is undergoing a number of significant transformations. There is the developing Middle Eastern order which, if somewhat crude and over optimistic in conception, nevertheless has powerful supporters in both Europe and the US. Two major conferences, Casablanca and Amman, have already been held to promote the idea of a Middle Eastern market. And despite resistance within the region to this new Middle Easternism it

remains fundamental to Western versions of a peaceful Middle East which seem to be pre-occupied, like Al Gore's notion of a comprehensive peace ("complete normalisation of relations between all the Arab countries without exception and Israel") on form rather than content.

A second regional development centres on the Mediterranean basin. Like the concept of a new Middle Eastern order it, too, is rooted in a reaction to post-Gulf war emergent ideologies. In this case the spread of Islamism. The two are also linked by at least one ulterior aim: to sanctify and secure Israel's presence in the region so that it will never become a pretext for the outbreak of another war.

A third, less comprehensive trend, has emerged to attempt to accelerate Arab economic integration. While this has gained acceptance on a governmental level, such proposals remain controversial among sectors of the intellectual and business elite and among political analysts and the opposition from both the left and right in many Arab countries.

Directly or indirectly, the changes outlined above are all products of the war to liberate Kuwait, or else gained momentum as a result of that war. They are certainly far removed from the changes we had hoped to see in the immediate aftermath of the war. Then pundits were confidently predicting a whole host of developments that have failed to materialise. Then the process of democratisation was expected to accelerate. Yet apart from a few isolated instances the region's experiments with democracy have all floundered, in some cases with very serious results.

We had also expected, in the wake of the Gulf War, far greater solidarity among the members of

By
Gamil Matar

regional organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Maghreb Union. Yet precisely the opposite appears to have been true. Divisions have increased to such an extent that they now appear to constitute irreparable ruptures.

Any improvement in relations between regional organisations and the Arab League, intended to assist the League in making conflict resolution mechanisms more efficient, have also failed to materialise. To all intents and purposes the Arab League is now paralysed. Past experiences, it would seem, have taught us nothing.

In the period immediately following the war it was also thought that the countries of the region would resolve to desist from meddling in the internal affairs of their neighbours, but instances of such interference have become, if anything, more frequent. Within the past two years alone there have been eight blatant instances of direct intervention.

We had expected that Arab governments would reach an agreement or protocol defining and delimiting the regional role of the US and other great powers in the region. This, again, has not happened. Yet the longer the Arabs delay in defining the nature of their relationship with the US, the greater the perils for the region, particularly the Gulf which has always been vulnerable.

There was also hope that the government in Iraq would have changed from within in order to avert exposing the Iraqi people to further suffering and

hardship. Arab politics, however, simply do not work that way. No one could have imagined that Iraq would remain isolated for such a long time. Arab countries have not realised the dangers of excluding a people from its natural environment for so long.

Frankly, I still believe that the Kuwaitis and the Iraqis have paid the exorbitant price of the radical surgery that was later performed on the Arab-Israeli peace process. This is not to imply, by any means, that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was instigated from abroad. Rather, from the moment it took place, the initiative in many matters related to the Middle East moved out of Arab hands.

There has been no change in the way in which Arab leaders deal with one another. Intolerance and mutual suspicion are still the norm. Candor has made very little mark in the many summit meetings in which leaders might tell one another their true perspectives on how to meet the challenges of the future.

Similarly, there is disappointment that Arab intellectuals from across the Arab World, regardless of their ideological inclinations, have not resumed their leading role in formulating Arab culture. Instead, we find violence in written form. As it happened, a large segment of intellectuals seem to have joined forces with governments and prevalent street sentiment in a frantic celebration of violence that threatens to erupt at any place and any time. We have little time before the banners of violence fly higher than those of wisdom and tolerance.

The writer is director of the Arab Centre for Development and Futuristic Research.

Mother of all resolutions

By
Salah Bassyouni

It is on record that no member state of the United Nations has been subjected to the unprecedented number of Security Council resolutions as Iraq. Of all these resolutions, Resolution 687, nicknamed the "mother of all resolutions" is the most important.

A majority of the members of the UN Security Council and General Assembly believe that sanctions should be lifted as Iraq has accepted and implemented all that has been required of it. However, the US is still maintaining its hardline position and insists that sanctions must continue. This is an unprecedented case in the annals of international relations whereby a defeated country is subjected to such harsh treatment five years after the end of the war without any serious attempt for normalisation or reconciliation.

At present, the debate concerns Security Council Resolution 986 which permits a partial lifting of sanctions on Iraq, allowing it to export \$1 billion of oil every three months. This license is not unconditional; exports must be transported through the pipeline to Turkey. One third of the receipts goes to Iraq to satisfy its humanitarian needs, another third for compensation, and the final third to Kurdish northern Iraq. The UN is responsible for the management and distribution of this money.

Unsurprisingly, Baghdad has rejected this resolution which infringes on its sovereignty and is a sort of international trusteeship on Iraq. However, taking into consideration the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Iraq and mounting international pressure to deal with it, the Security Council decided to send an international commission to Iraq to assess the situation.

It seems evident that Iraq is helpless vis-à-vis these resolutions which it cannot either revise or continue to reject. In its endeavour to normalise its relations with the

Arab World and international community, Iraq is trying at present to keep the door open for negotiations in order to attain an acceptable and practical interpretation of these resolutions.

After Iraq rejected Resolution 986, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz expressed in a message to UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali his government's readiness to start a dialogue with the UN. The UN secretary-general responded promptly to Aziz, but he stressed that any dialogue is not intended to revise or interpret Resolution 986. It is designed, he said, only to find ways and means for its implementation, and that the formula of "oil for food" embodied in this resolution is, in the end, in the interests of Iraq.

Meanwhile, France has sent an important group headed by its former Foreign Minister Jean-Bernard on a fact finding mission. France is known to sympathise with the humanitarian needs of Iraq. At the same time, Egypt is trying to help in lifting the sanctions. Moves to develop bilateral relations are already in progress.

Against these developments, the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher declared in a speech at Harvard University last week that sanctions against Iraq will continue for a long time to come. This statement casts doubt on the prospects for the dialogue. It is evident that the US is not ready for change until a new regional order and comprehensive peace are realised in the Middle East. It is difficult, under such circumstances and with the present Arab situation, to perceive a way of implementing Resolution 986 which would safeguard the dignity, sovereignty and national independence of Iraq.

The writer is former Egyptian ambassador to the Soviet Union, a lawyer and political analyst.

In the name of the world

By
Mahmoud Saad

Early this March the United Nations Security Council is scheduled to meet to discuss one of the most agonising items on its agenda: sanctions against Iraq — whether to extend or lift them. At the end of the same month the council is supposed to discuss the case of Libya and whether to extend or lift air travel and arms sanctions imposed on the regime in Tripoli.

In the case of Iraq, the American administration, a great believer in the viability of economic sanctions, has let its position be known very clearly: sanctions should not be lifted until Iraq complies to the letter with all UN resolutions relating to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The United States has adopted more or less the same position towards Libya.

Iraq is calling for an end to the nightmare. Conditions in the country are seriously deteriorating, the people are suffering desperately and Baghdad believes it has already complied with what it was requested to do. Many countries believe sanctions should either be suspended or partially lifted, their positions mainly based on justified humanitarian considerations.

The case of Iraq is, in fact, indicative of a newly evolving pattern in contemporary world politics. The Security Council is being used as a vehicle to achieve certain ends on behalf and in the name of the world community without the bulk of the UN member-states being allowed to participate in the decision-making process.

Equality among members of the international community is a founding principle of UN Charter. But unfortunately, the UN allows the principle to be violated by other provisions within its charter. An ineffective mandate is, for example, given to the overwhelming majority of member-states while overriding powers are in the clutch of only the five permanent members of the Security Council. Management of significant international affairs and crises is, therefore, rendered a process confined exclusively to a small club of nations.

This new pattern poses grave risks to the collective security system which the UN is supposed to administer. The organisation's role as guarantor of world peace and stability is likely to be faced with challenging threats.

What has spared the UN until now from meeting the same fate as the League of Nations — which collapsed at the outbreak of World War II — is that it has refrained from diving into crises where consensus on the way they should be handled has not been established. It has confined its role to issuing resolutions without further tangible or decisive interference — mainly because of the constraints which the bipolar international order of the Cold War years imposed. The UN's different commissions and specialised agencies, from which many developing nations benefit, have also ensured its survival.

The cases of Vietnam, the Middle East and Afghanistan are three good examples in a long list of crises where the UN has kept out of the fray. The Korean War of 1950-53 is perhaps an exception to the rule; UN forces backed the South Koreans when they were invaded by communist North Korea. The UN was, however, only able to do this because the Soviet Union had withdrawn from the UN's task-force mission from the very start.

Decisive action on the UN's part without a long-term consensus from the world community would only result in distrust towards the organisation. Its credibility could be destroyed, thus entailing far-reaching consequences that could ultimately put the need for the UN itself into question. The cases of Somalia and Bosnia are two good examples, and the case of Iraq — though of a different kind — could soon be a third.

By virtue of the status they enjoy and the role and mandate they are accorded, the leading nations of the world have a responsibility towards the international community. It is their task to provide the necessary elements for the preservation of peace and stability on the globe, especially in this fragile transitional period from one world order to another when no definite long-term balance of power has yet been established. It is an obligation, not a choice; a task, not an option.

The writer is the deputy director of the Department of Balkan and Southern European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The article above expresses the personal views of the writer.

Computer games

By
Magdi Youssef

It is astonishing how the media coverage of the Gulf War is still, five years on, disguising the real factors behind it by presenting it as if it were no more than a computer game. This applies to the CNN broadcasting as well as the ongoing BBC series on the subject. The TV series should, instead of merely highlighting the ignominy of the oil wells in Kuwait by retreating Iraqi forces, enlighten its viewers about the real reasons which motivated George Bush to take military action in the Gulf.

After five years it is time people all over the world were told the factors which led to the Gulf War. Chief among them was the fact that the Pentagon was carrying out military manoeuvres in Arizona more than a decade before the Gulf War, in preparation for a war in the Middle East. The desert in Arizona and the Middle East are similar. Saddam Hussein was lured by the US into Kuwait, to give the US the opportunity to attack Iraq and to gain control of the oil in the region.

The war was an excuse to use the military arsenal of the US in a real battlefield in order to test and produce new weapons which would replace older equipment. This would add to the profits of the US investment in arms.

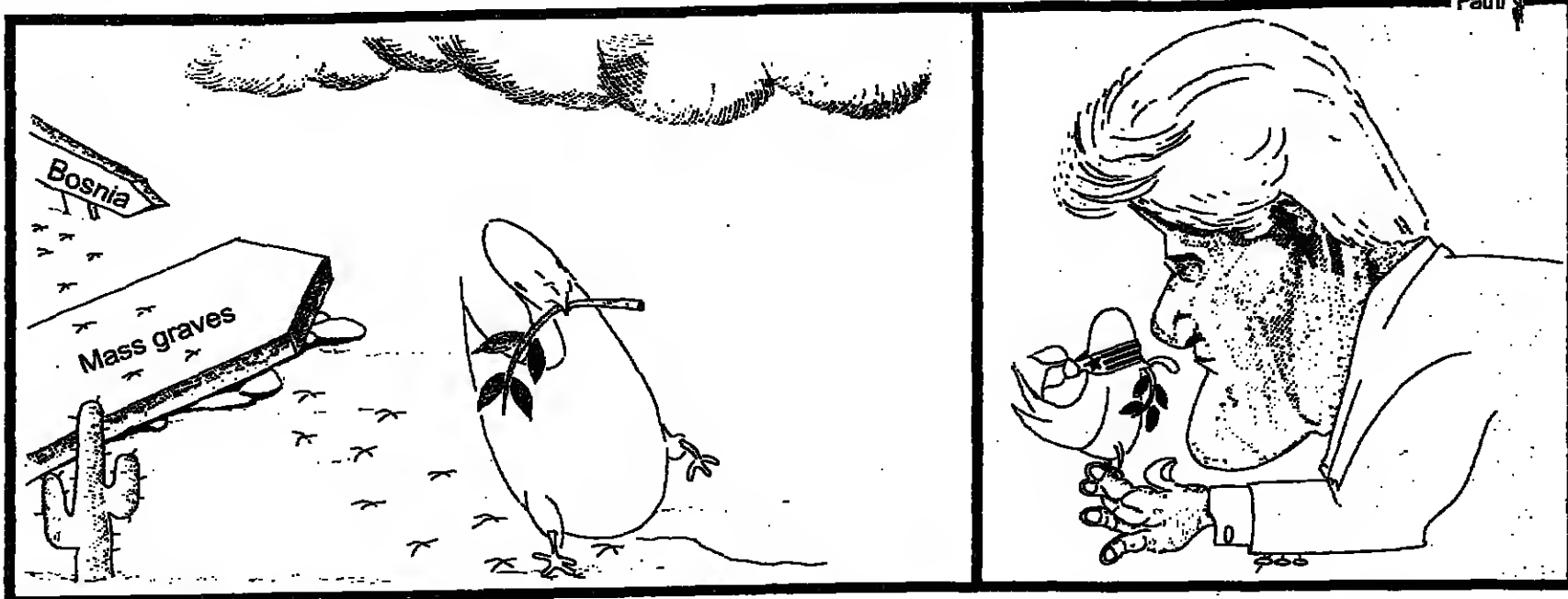
It was calculated that the war would not only give the US full control of the oil resources of the Arab Gulf states, but it would also gain control over Japan's consumption of Middle East oil. No less than 80 per cent of Japan's industrial requirements depended on Middle Eastern oil.

And what was the outcome of the Gulf War? Because of UN resolutions the Iraqi population had to bear the cost of clearing away the huge quantities of bombs which were dropped in Kuwait on the retreating Iraqi army by the allied forces.

The US got huge reconstruction contracts from Kuwait to rebuild what was bombed by the allied forces during the Gulf War. The UN resolutions gave Kuwait the right to rebuild at the cost of the Iraqi people.

The UN resolutions depriving the helpless Iraqi population of basic needs, i.e. food and medication, are tantamount to genocide. Many Iraqis have died from malnutrition and lack of medical provisions. Newborn babies, the sick and the elderly are particularly vulnerable, as the UN continues to implement its sanctions. The motivations behind the Gulf War and the outcomes are not less cruel or unjust than those of the Vietnam War.

The writer is a professor of Cultural Sociology, currently resident in Germany.



Russian Communists march back

The run-up to the Russian presidential elections, due to be held on 16 June, has begun in earnest. There are no less than 30 presidential hopefuls, but few of these are likely to make a strong showing.

The elections come at a time when Russian President Boris Yeltsin faces serious health problems and a crisis of confidence among his people. Russian and ethnic Ukrainian coal miners went on strike last Thursday from the far eastern Russian region of Primorye to the Arctic town of Vorkuta in the northernmost part of the country. More miners are on strike in the mineral-rich Ural mountains and parts of the Ukraine which border Russia.

The miners are striking because they have not been paid for the past three months. President Yeltsin's First Deputy Finance Minister Andrei Petrov, though, claimed that \$600 million in wage arrears were reimbursed to the miners on 31 January.

In a last-ditch attempt to calm tensions, Yeltsin last week signed a decree ordering Petrov — his economic advisor

Russia lumbers towards presidential elections as striking miners usher in a winter of discontent. The polls will be yet another test of the growing strength of the reformed Communists, writes **Abdel-Malek Khalil** from Moscow

— and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to monitor the situation closely and report on the latest developments to the president's office on a regular basis.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Soviet Union, is still undecided as to whether he should stand for election or not. He is, in any case, determined to regain some measure of the respect and prestige he enjoyed a decade ago. He is also keen to see Yeltsin pay for orchestrating his downfall, destroying the Soviet state and plunging Russia into what he sees as the political chaos it suffers from today.

Yeltsin, for his part, declared that he had no respect for Gorbachev — that he neither liked him personally nor respected him as a politician or a statesman. At any rate, it is estimated that Gorbachev enjoys the support of no more than a mere

one per cent of the Russian electorate. President Yeltsin, on the other hand, has postponed making his decision on whether to stand for another term in office until 13 to 15 February. Yeltsin supporters hope that by that date the future over the striking miners will have died down.

Yeltsin has focused on winning the support of Russia's youth in his presidential campaign. He has visited several university campuses to explain the urgent necessity of continuing with his economic reforms and open-door policies.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the presidential race is boiling down to one between Yeltsin and his supporters, and the Communists. The reformed Russian Communist Party gained impressive victories in the parliamentary elections last December. They are today the biggest bloc in

the Duma council — Russia's lower house of parliament. If personalities like Grigori Yavlinski, leader of the liberal reform Yabloko bloc, and others from the democratic groups are selected as candidates for the presidency, Yeltsin's position will undoubtedly be weakened — and that of the Communists strengthened.

However, an important segment of the democratic reform voters still rally around Yeltsin. They are hostile to the Communists' cause and feel that Yeltsin alone can block their revival. Yeltsin, his hangers-on and the supporters of the democratic reform parties see the Communists as their main rivals and the main threat to political stability and continued reform in Russia.

Oleg Shinin, the head of the umbrella Union of Communist Parties, declared that his organisation and its supporters were

determined to elect reformed Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, now that he has decided to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming elections. The other leftist parties in Russia are jostling for position, but none seems to be winning much public support. Russia's Workers Party mustered only five per cent of the ballot in the parliamentary elections last December and failed to gain any seats in the Duma. It is important to note, however, that in a country the size of Russia this percentage accounts for no less than five million voters.

Muscovites seem to prefer the programmes of democratic reform parties, such as Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's Our Home is Russia and Russia's Democratic Choice and Yabloko. The younger generations, who grew up as the Soviet system was collapsing, are also more likely

to vote for continued reform. Their vote is likely to be split between Yeltsin and the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. They are not inclined to be sympathetic to the aims of the Communist Party.

There are those in the Yeltsin camp, the most vociferous of whom is Minister of Transport Gennady Vadiyev, who are in favour of inducing segments of the Russian workforce, such as the railway workers and other transport workers, to vote for Yeltsin. However, with the miners up in arms, it is doubtful whether the Russian president and his supporters could count on the labour unions.

Yeltsin earlier last week promised the teachers unions that money from state coffers was on its way. "We have the money and it is just because of the lack of organisation in the relevant bodies and bureaucratic departments that people are not getting salaries on time," he claimed. But whether the working people of Russia will vote for Yeltsin to hold a second term in office as president of the Russian Federation is debatable.



An earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale struck the southern Chinese province of Yunnan, devastating Lijiang county on 3 February, killing 245 people (photo:AP)

Green Greek sunset

"These are historic times," said former Greek Premier Andreas Papandreu from his hospital bed on Monday 15 January, as he signed a statement announcing his resignation after a political career of more than 30 years.

The two-month deadlock in the Greek political scenario, caused by the ill health of Premier Andreas Papandreu, 75, finally ended in January. Former Minister of Industry Kostas Simitis, 60, was elected as the new prime minister on 18 January, at a meeting of the central committee of the ruling PASOK Party (Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement). The change in leadership signals a new era for Greek politics, one of more realistic political objectives, stringent economic policies and a general move closer to the conditions set by the European Commission. Papandreu's name is synonymous with modern Greek socialism. He founded PASOK — Greece's largest socialist party — in 1974, during the right-wing reign of Constantine Karamanlis. PASOK ruled Greece from 1981 to 1989, then after a four-year hiatus it was re-elected to another four years in 1993. Throughout this time Papandreu held the presidency of the party, and thus the presidency of the nation, unchallenged.

PASOK's ascension to power in 1981 was gloriously heralded by the Greek nation, particularly by the workers and rural voters, who placed great hope in PASOK's socialist dream. During the early 1980s, the majority of rural households had the green rising sun of PASOK's achievements during the eighties were predominantly social: martial law was ended, family law was changed, a system of free education and hospitalisation was institutionalised, and state pensions were increased.

On the economic front though, PASOK was unsuccessful: state coffers were unashamedly emptied into social programmes, resulting in an

economic crisis. Despite the paucity of PASOK's and Papandreu's achievements in the 1980s, the party was re-elected in 1993. The election was won on the promise of alleviating the economic crisis. Also important was the fact that a socialist government ensured the existence of the national consensus known as *kenro-aristara* — left-centred government. The Greeks had long suffered under military rule and right-wing governments. Therefore, they yearned for a popularly elected and predominantly socialist parliament which would act as a stabilising factor. Hence the critical importance of maintaining the *kenro-aristara*.

In the 1990s, the Papandreu government failed to tackle the economic crisis. But the government continued to sustain a degree of legitimacy by harping on populist rhetoric and claiming to uphold the *kenro-aristara*.

Turkey and Greece quibble over Aegean island

GREECE lodged an official complaint with Turkey last week, protesting that a Turkish patrol boat attempted to ram Greek fishing boats in the Aegean Sea that separates the two countries. According to the Greeks, the Turkish vessel fired warning shots as it crossed paths with the Greek boats.

The Turkish authorities, on the other hand downplayed the incident. Greece and Turkey are traditional rivals for control over the Aegean Sea. The two neighbours have gone to war several times in the past. The United States Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who was the chief architect of the Bosnian peace accord signed in Paris last December, defused the tensions between the two NATO nations last week. Under US pressure Greece and Turkey withdrew military forces from an uninhabited island off the coast of Turkey where the Greeks accused the Turks of fomenting the crisis. Athens and Ankara are at loggerheads because of other longstanding disputes including the Cyprus question and oil drilling rights in the Aegean Sea.

ernment. Cabinet members have been cut down, from 52 to 40, and the majority of the ministers chosen are in their forties. Furthermore, a vast majority of Papandreu's loyal aides are not included in the cabinet. Only two ministers out of the 14 who were considered loyal to Papandreu have been retained. Through such actions, Simitis is directly turning away from the policies and ideas of the Papandreu government, opening the way for a new era in Greek politics.

Simitis and his aides have pro-European Union sentiments. Their objective is to align Greece's economy with those of its European partners by the end of the decade. This will probably be done through a six-year economic austerity programme that was designed by Simitis in the mid-1980s and scrapped by the free-spending Papandreu in order to win votes. Over the last two years, PASOK-oriented community leaders, mayors, regional councillors, academics and workers' unions have been calling for the re-institution of Simitis' six-year programme as a means of resolving the economic crisis. Simitis was essentially elected on the basis of this programme and is popularly known as the "six-yearist" or *eksiethoristis*.

In general, Simitis has presented the Greek nation with more realistic social and economic programmes. The economic austerity programme will be undertaken without compromising fundamental elements of Greece's welfare state. The nation seems to be pleasantly content with the new status quo. Greek social analysts have characterised this period as one in which "a climate of positive expectations prevails, which one rarely encounters in surveys of popular opinions, and on such a vast scale".

If Simitis plays his cards right in the next 21 months by following the proposed programmes, he will probably win the general elections in October 1997.

Euro currency at a price

Europe is currently organising a huge marketing campaign for its proposed single currency. But, writes **Faiza Rami**, monetary union is being built on the ruins of the continent's social welfare system

After this winter's strike waves which paralysed life in France and this week's planned rounds of work stoppages and demonstrations, the future of the 1999 target date for achieving European Monetary Union (EMU) looks bleak. The workers are protesting the government's resolve to reduce budget deficits by slashing social security to qualify for the EMU in 1999. The backlash is beginning. Throughout the continent, the Europhobia of Maastricht '92 has become the Europhobia of '96. The French daily *Le Monde* commented *Newsweek* magazine. The French daily *Le Monde* commented high European Union (EU) officials in Brussels as proclaiming that the EMU's future could be decided on the streets of Paris.

To counter workers' grievances and sell EMU more effectively, financial institutions have organised a multi-million-dollar marketing campaign promoting the "Euro" — the proposed single currency. The campaign was kicked off by a 22 January three-day seminar gathering more than 400 of Europe's most prestigious economists, commissioned to convince the public that the Euro "will make the continent more peaceful, prosperous and a better place to live".

An earlier 20 January meeting in Paris between the finance ministers and Central Bank governors from the G7 — the seven leading industrialised countries: Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — laid out the ground-work for a common strategy and platform. "We must bring a common European response to the difficult situation in Europe," commented French government spokesman and Budget Minister Alain Lamassoure. At a meeting of the EU's finance ministers in Brussels, the British chancellor of the exchequer, Kenneth Clarke, explained that the solution to social unrest lay in increased labour market flexibility through the curbing of trade-union power and ending national bargaining.

Ignacio Ramonet, editor of the prestigious monthly, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, sees things in a different light. "Everywhere citizens are asking themselves what interest there is in building Europe on the ruins of the welfare state on social regression?" he wrote. In France, like elsewhere, the market economy determines a growing social disparity as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Hence 17 million people control 80 per cent of all assets, while another 17 million only hold 1.2 per cent. Over the past two decades, governments of the right and left have progressively dismantled the welfare state by adopting economic neo-liberal policies.

Although the late Francois Mitterrand started his presidency in '81 by implementing a conventional socialist platform, he veered from his course only two years later — opting for what he called "modernity", a euphemism for economic deregulation. Reversing the initial nationalisation drive, his administration proceeded to privatise the public sector — by 1986, 65 state-owned companies had been sold. As a result, unemployment rates soared from three per cent in the early '70s to the current 11.7 per cent, and the later Mitterrand years were riddled with social upheaval presaging this winter's strikes. In 1986, a public workers' strike over budget slashes paralysed life in the capital for one month. Similarly in 1988, hundreds of thousands took to the streets protesting over salary freezes and benefit cuts. In 1990, a demonstration against educational budget cuts brought 200,000 high-school students to the streets of Paris. And over the following years, student and labour militancy increased as material conditions continued to deteriorate.

President Jacques Chirac's intention to reduce the deficit by further undermining the social security budget was the straw that broke the camel's back. While workers vented their rage over the latest reform package imposed by EU market interests, the media almost unequivocally sided with the government. Franz-Olivier Giesbert, managing editor of the French daily *Le Figaro*, referred to the strikers as the "social racket". The newspaper blasted the railroad workers for "holding France hostage to pressure her further". Claude Lancelotti, director of the weekly *Le Point*, editorially echoed his colleague's position: "On one side is a France aspiring to work and struggle, on the other stands a France camping on acquired advantages".

On the workers' side, however, the notion of "acquired advantages" appear compromised. While the Chirac administration vigorously promoted its early decision to increase the sales tax as equitable, simple arithmetic disproves the point. In effect, the tax's flat rate penalises the poor whose payments amount to a disproportionate ratio of their income. Moreover, the sales tax makes up 61 per cent of fiscal revenues, while real estate and property taxes on the rich only constitute five per cent of state income.

The income tax system does not redress the situation. Although the tax index is both proportional and progressive, low-income groups pay more than the affluent. A case in point: a couple with two children, whose combined salaries amount to the minimum annual wage of 85,000 francs, pay about 47 per cent of their income in total deductions — including social security — while the rate falls to some 40 per cent for a couple with a five-fold higher revenue of 400,000 francs.

As for the social security system, its rate is neither proportionally adjusted nor progressive, but regressive — i.e. deductions decrease as income increases. For example, there is a six per cent deduction on the first 10,000 francs of one's salary. However, 20,000 and 40,000 franc income brackets only pay three and 1.5 per cent respectively.

As a result, entire generations have borne the cost of a system which imposes higher deductions on its working poor. A double penalty is levied on families with two wage earners, especially low-income families in which both spouses often work to make ends meet. The poor are also required to pay for longer into the pension funds; they consequently retire later from harder manual jobs and die at a younger age.

Moreover, the media continues to camouflage the social security's real contributors — claiming that the bulk of the charges are paid by company owners. "In reality, [company] social security payments are integrally recouped in the sale price of products and commercial goods and services," explained Christian de Brie in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. In the EU, social security is financed by company and salary deductions and/or taxes. In addition, company deductions have recently greatly reduced in France, whereas salary deductions increased. In most cases, governments finance the system through a combination of taxes and deductions — as in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. Other countries like Denmark, Britain and Ireland mostly rely on tax revenues; while France and Greece are the only ones to almost exclusively use deduction funds.

In comparison with France, the Danish system seems much more equitable. Salary deductions are 10 times less than in France and although the income tax — which essentially finances social security — is four times higher than the French tax, comparative labour costs are 20 per cent higher. Also, higher income groups are progressively taxed higher in real terms than the working poor who are not obliged to pay an exorbitant price to insure their welfare. In this context it is noteworthy that Denmark has consistently been critical of Maastricht and the EMU strategy that imposes fiscal austerity through social spending cuts.

Despite the financial institutions' single currency marketing campaign and the European finance ministers' flurry of meetings in Brussels and elsewhere, French workers are conscious of the stakes. They know that all the speeches about the imperatives of the single currency, "modernity" and "work flexibility" ultimately mask an additional assault on their livelihood in the name of the market. "In France today, the stakes of the social struggle are once again determined by the distribution of produced and accumulated resources that the ruling classes seek to modify to their advantage," explained de Brie. During the November-December strikes, a railroad worker summarised the situation in simple but real terms: "The more we work now, the less we make."

Edited by Gamal Nkrumah

Al-Ahram: A Diwan of contemporary life

"Cairo's inhabited surface area is 3880 feddans. It has 35,324 kilometres of streets, 374,838 inhabitants of whom 21,650 are foreigners. The most populous portion has 1,424 inhabitants per feddan and the least populous has only 298 persons per feddan. There are 55,597 houses and 279 mosques."

Thus reads an extract from a lengthy report drafted by the deputy minister of public works. Published in *Al-Ahram* on 8 April 1892, the study was conducted in preparation for the installation of Cairo's first sewer system.

There are many interesting aspects to this story, not the least of which is the rapid growth of Egypt's capital city as revealed in the statistics cited in the report. In the fifteen years following the British occupation of Egypt, Cairo's population increased by 52 per cent. An enormous growth rate by any standards, the demographics involved would also affect the modern urban service projects being designed for the developing city.

During this same period, there was an influx into the capital of numbers of large and middle landowners, a class that had been growing steadily during the second half of the 19th century. There was also a rapid increase in the influx of foreigners, who came to represent six per cent of Cairo's population. The report cited above indicates a sharp discrepancy between two different portions of the city: "Cairo is divided into two distinct sections. The first, more crowded, is on the higher elevations of land beginning with a line defined by Al-Khalig Al-Masri and extending eastward toward the desert and the spur of the Citadel. The majority of the inhabitants are native Egyptians. The second portion, less crowded, extending westward toward the Nile, is inhabited by foreigners and wealthy Egyptians."

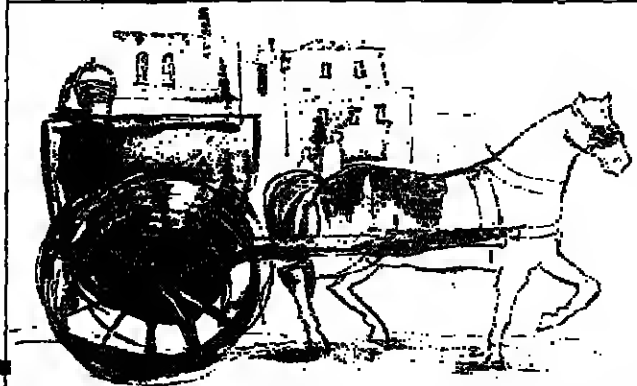
One advantage of this disparity was that it provided those capable of affording the new service. Nevertheless, they were few. According to the same report, only 4,297 houses, or eight per cent of all dwellings, were furnished with piped-in fresh water. Given that the water company was founded in 1865, this gives us some idea of how long it took in order to obtain this service. Mr. Moncrieff, deputy minister of public works and author of the report, was certainly aware of this shortcoming. He wrote, "In no more than two years, the greater portion of the sewer system will be ready for operation. However, it will be much longer than that before it is connected to all the people's homes."

The surge in population made it necessary to upgrade services such as water, electricity, roads and communications, not to mention waste disposal. Fittingly, our chapter opens with successive complaints against the old waste disposal system, which was hardly appropriate for a capital city, or at least its newly developed districts.

Dredging out the water closets in Cairo's homes, mosques and public buildings remained the primary means of waste disposal until the turn of the century. With Cairo's burgeoning population and changing

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Cairo got its first sewage system in the last decade of the 19th century at a cost of a million pounds. But then Cairo's inhabitants numbered less than 400,000. Of 30 tenders offered for construction of the system, three were deemed of "equal validity and worth" — one from an Egyptian engineer and two from French and Italian engineers. The Egyptian tender was preferred. In his chronicles of Egyptian life put together from reports in *Al-Ahram*, Dr Yunan Labib Rizq tells the story of Cairo's first sewage system



be required would be normal piping "in which the waste would be propelled by gravity toward a specific collection point, where it would be pumped at high velocity through metal pipes to agricultural land, thus serving a useful function." They added that "the desert area to the north-east of the city would be an appropriate area to be irrigated by the above-mentioned sewerage pipes." The three proposals also estimated the project as costing less than LE500,000. That one of the winners was an Egyptian was received with great delight. In addition to the LE200 prize, Mohammed Effendi Fahmi was also granted the title of bey.

As the project got under way, numerous problems emerged. Owners of the homes destined to be connected to the sewer system were required to "implement the elementary sanitation requirement of ensuring sufficient water so as to expel waste products." This meant subscribing to the water authority to have pumped water installed in the homes. Also, not only would representatives from the health department have the right to inspect people's homes, but, on the insistence of international consuls, it was decided that "consular representatives would accompany the government representatives."

Government appropriation of land for the project posed another problem. After further international objections, the project designs had to be altered so that property owned by foreigners enjoying consular protection would not be subject to appropriation. *Al-Ahram* complained bitterly against discrimination between foreigners and Egyptians.

Last but not least, there arose the question of whether it was optional or obligatory to have one's home connected to the sewer system. One suspects the latter when *Al-Ahram* tells its readers that "the project will save the yearly expenses of having the latrine cleaned and it will improve the value of one's property," and exhorts, "We hope that people subscribe to the project voluntarily, sparing the government the task of using compulsion."

The costly 1898 expedition to regain Sudan delayed the implementation of Cairo's waste disposal project. *Al-Ahram* was vehemently opposed to the campaign on the grounds that it was only conducted to serve British interests. Its criticism of the delay of the sewer project was, therefore, all the more severe. On 28 April 1898, its first page editorial reads, "Cairo is left to decay and its people hold their patient silence, but how long will they have to wait until they get the vital reforms their city needs?"

Fortunately, this time, Cairo residents did not have to wait too long. The following year, the government resumed the project, overcoming administrative and financial problems.

The author is a professor of history and head of Al-Ahram History Studies Centre.

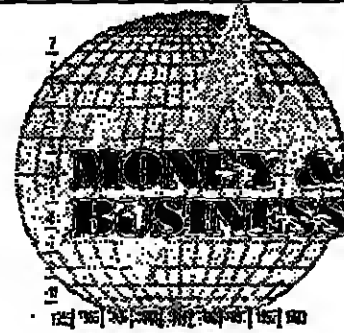


Insurance and its purpose

THE IDEA of insurance is built on the society's sharing of the losses befalling individuals because of fire, burglary, accidents, etc.

It is a role required for the interest of society itself as the losses of different strata of society such as merchants and workers have direct impact on the economy. The purpose of insurance is to alleviate the effect of these losses through compensation by virtue of the insurance premiums collected from individuals including those who are not prone to direct damage. Furthermore, there is an international system adopted by major international insurance companies. This system is called re-insurance.

MONEY & BUSINESS



Automobile conference in Warsaw

MAJOR automobile and automotive parts manufacturers held a meeting this past week in Warsaw, Poland to discuss means for increasing production and sales in both eastern and central European markets, which are witnessing remarkable growth. With the increased demand for automobiles and inexpensive skilled labour, some US\$4bn in projects are slated for the region, from companies such as Daewoo, Fiat, General Motors, Volkswagen, and others. It is expected that the annual growth of automobile sales in eastern and central Europe will rise by 10 per cent, in spite of ownership still being restricted in comparison to western Europe.

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NBE and the commodity import programme for the private sector

THE NATIONAL Bank of Egypt (NBE), together with 22 Egyptian banks, have embarked upon a commodity import programme in the framework of the US economic aid programme to Egypt. The US\$200mn programme will be allocated to financing the private sector companies' imports of American commodities.

An initial share of the programme amount is allocated to each participant bank, to be directed to importing the commodities allowed by virtue of the list of the USAID which excludes luxurious goods. However, the said facilities are not to be used in importing goods banned by Egyptian law. In addition, the imported goods should be related to the business of the importer and not to be re-exported in the same condition unless it constitutes an essential component of the final

product. According to the programme, the minimum of any financed operation should not be less than \$10,000 unless it is otherwise agreed. The maximum range of finance varies between \$5 and \$15mn depending on whether it is a capital commodity or not. Finance can exceed the maximum limit upon a written approval from the Ministry of International Cooperation. Furthermore, participant banks may open documentary credits without advance payment by the importer who may also be granted grace periods without interest in case of importing capital goods. Spare parts are treated as capital goods if they are imported with the capital equipment in the same operation. When spare parts are imported solely, they are treated as non-capital goods. The projects which can enjoy

grace periods are those located in Fayoum, Beni Suef, El-Minya, Assiut, Sohag, Gena and Aswan (to promote development in Upper Egypt). Grace periods are also extended to the importer who exports more than 50 per cent of his sales during the latest fiscal year, whether he was an importer of capital goods or not.

The exchange rate applied to the programme operations is the average of the daily closing rate of transfers (seles) declared by the Central Chamber of Free Foreign Exchange Market in the day proceeding the opening of the documentary credit.

NBE's participation in the said programme is a pursuance of its pivotal role in financing Egypt's foreign trade, as the bank offers solely 30 per cent of total finance deemed necessary for this sector.

Establishing new companies

THE COMPANIES committee at the Ministry of Economy, headed by Ahmed Fouad Alta, first under-secretary of the Ministry of Economy, approved the establishment of 31 companies from 20-25 January 1996. Among those receiving permission to operate are 20 joint stock companies, with total authorised capital of LE27,825,000. Eleven of these companies are with limited liability. As for location, 10 of them are headquartered in Cairo, 1 in Sidi Barani, 3 in Alexandria, 10 in Giza, 2 in Tenth of Ramadan, and one each in Mahalla, Benha, Belqas and Newelba. The companies will operate in a wide range of fields: 5 in the field of contracting, 11 commercial companies, 4 in industry, 10 in services, 5 in tourism and 1 banking.

Reconstruction at a quick pace

WAR-TORN Yugoslavia is beginning to witness signs of peace, the success of which will be determined by economic aid. In this regard, the

US\$500mn contributions that were pledged by many countries at a donor conference that took place last December in Brussels will be channelled towards

emergency reconstruction in areas deemed vital to the survival of the country. After an assessment carried out on site by the World Bank's mission in

Sarajevo, the board of directors recommended at least \$10mn to help devastated Bosnia get back on its feet. The World Bank still

hopes to get the remainder required to make up for the destruction that caused financial losses worth \$25bn.

Moving towards computers

WHEN taking a decision to change the computer system of any establishment, the systems analyst is faced with one of the following situations:

1- The establishment desires to implement a computer system while it is still being established. Taher El-Shelhi, professor of computers and data processing, says that the systems analyst must calculate and consider the goals of company and its needs, whether it needs the computers to function within the establishment itself or to be connected to a network which would connect it to other branches of the establishment.

2- The establishment still handles its data manually and wishes to transfer it to computer.

In this case, we find that the position in regards to the systems analysis is more difficult than in the previous case. The analyst will himself encounter many problems and difficulties, not the least of which include having to take into consideration the administrative organisation of the establishment. Related to this is the changes that may have to be made in the allocation of authority and responsibility to various parts of the establishment. Added to this is the fact that computers may remove the need for some positions within the establishment's organisation.

3- The establishment is already set up with a computer system, but now seeks to upgrade its system.

In this case, the system programmer is usually faced with two situations: Either the establishment is currently using a specific system and wishes to continue with it, by means of upgrading to the latest version. Here we find the systems analyst job a relatively easy one as upgrading in this manner is fairly simple. The second situation is the desire of an establishment to transform their current system to one that is completely different, which requires the careful consideration of the systems analyst so the current system does not become totally obsolete.

Al-Ahram Weekly

The big uneasy

In Bill Clinton's mind, campaign time is the right time for deal making and deadlock breaking. In this light, one more step towards peace by Israel and Syria could put a much-needed notch in Clinton's foreign policy belt of achievements. And so, with all the best intentions, Christopher has arrived in the Middle East on his 17th visit, seeking to find form and focus to negotiations bumbling and stumbling after the Maryland meeting.

Armed with poise, confidence and a promise from Peres that the Israeli elections will do nothing to jeopardize the peace process, he will now try to pinpoint the next logical step for the talks. But Assad's demand that land be exchanged for peace leaves no doubt that the onus rests with Israel.

This is where the water, white or otherwise, becomes muddied. Confronted by a strong, vocal and vociferous group of right wing extremists, Peres could find that during election time, his campaign strategy will be one of compromising versus standing firm for peace. For Bill Clinton, who is already suffering political setbacks as a result of his wife's involvement in Whitewater, this spells nothing but trouble. For Christopher, it means that since no guarantee can be given on the outcome of the elections, or their consequences, he must soften up Assad. But for Assad, a veteran of Israeli vacillation and manipulation, more likely than not, there will be no revisions of the land-for-peace deal.

Christopher hopes to reassure Assad that the Labour party will emerge from the elections better able to hammer out the Golan agreement. But who can assure Peres of the election's outcome? In the realm of politics, promises are often not worth the paper they are written on, and predictions, even less valuable.

For peace to materialise, action, not words are needed. Peres can no more afford to hold this process hostage to elections than can Clinton or Christopher. On its part, Syria has repeatedly assured that it is committed to peace. What better assurance, short of it backing down on its demands can be offered given that Israel's pledges have all been conditional.

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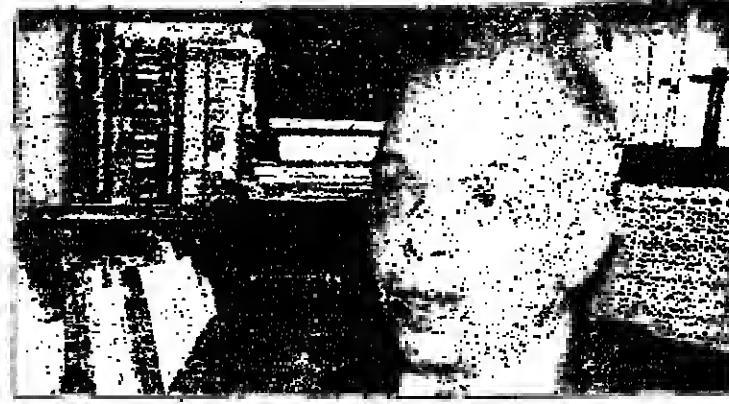
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Partnerships in progress

Ibrahim Nafie analyses the structural imbalances that must still be overcome if Egypt is to enter the next century on a firm footing



Any projections concerning Egypt's foreign trade in the next decade must take into account two sets of figures. The first is the surplus in the balance of payments over a spread of several years — some LE2,158 million in 1993-94 and LE759 million in 1994-95 — while the second set of figures relate to the balance of trade deficit, which reached \$7.3 billion in 1993-94 and \$7.8 billion for 1994-95.

A surplus in balance of payments is generally interpreted as a sign of good economic management. The large deficit in the balance of trade, on the other hand, betrays underlying weaknesses in our economic performance. Despite strenuous efforts at reform, major structural problems still persist.

Such a traditional reading of the statistics, though, hardly provides an accurate picture and may, indeed, be misleading. Surplus and deficit figures do not exist in isolation. They must be viewed within the overall context of programmes of comprehensive development and modernisation.

A deficit in itself is not always an ominous sign. More important is the nature of goods imported in any financial year. Will they contribute to increased production in the medium or longer term or are they simply consumer items? If imports augment future productive capacities then their actual costs can be discounted against the potential for increased export.

Nor is a surplus necessarily positive, since it can signify nothing more than the accumulation of financial assets from abroad. These can sit uselessly in bank accounts, making no contribution to investment or development.

Any meaningful analysis of our economic prospects requires that we break down the relevant figures into their component parts. Currently we are off setting deficits in visible trade with earnings from invisibles, including the remittances of Egyptians working abroad, proceeds from tourism and the income from the Suez Canal. Basically, we are exporting labour in order to import manufactured and agricultural goods for the domestic market. This situation betrays a fundamental structural imbalance which, if it is to be rectified, requires that we formulate realistic strategies to escape a vicious circle. Simply put — the longer Egypt's economy is geared to serving the economies of other nations in the Arab World and abroad, the longer we remain poor.

Phenomenal efforts have been already made to stimulate export led growth. Our export trade rose from \$3.3 billion in 93-94 to \$4.9 billion in 94-95. Yet more remains to be

done. The overwhelming majority of our exports are labour intensive consumer products. We have only a mediocre share of the international market in secondary products, while our share in the market for finished machinery and equipment comprises such a small percentage of our exports as to be negligible.

If we are ever to move from our overwhelming dependence on labour intensive, low value exports we must raise technological standards across the board. Our development philosophy for the first decades of the coming century must provide for this if we are not to remain, at best, servants of other nations' economies.

The general state of our balance of trade and balance of payments figures justifies the anxieties felt by economic and development experts. We are, after all, unable to guarantee that remittances from overseas workers will remain at present levels, let alone increase. Nor are there any

reasons to be optimistic about an economy that remains dependent on food and agricultural subsidies, particularly given the levels of inflation in prices of wheat and other foodstuffs. Neither can we take solace in improvements in export trade as long as our agricultural and industrial exports cover only 80 per cent of our consumer imports. Nor is it realistic to continue current policies involving the export of crude petroleum rather than investing in the infrastructure necessary for its processing.

The picture, though, is not totally bleak and while there are sufficient grounds for anxiety past achievements mean that it is not yet time to panic. We have bought a certain amount of time, probably about ten years. We must not squander it. The next decade must be spent effecting the major economic readjustments that will move the entire economy onto a new footing. Foreign trade must be completely reoriented in

line with rapid development. We have no choice but to transform ourselves from consumers to producers possessed of technical know how and expertise.

There is nothing wrong with continuing to export potatoes, cotton and ready-made clothes. But our future will be far from certain if we do not also export computers, communications hardware, office equipment and high-tech instruments. These are the standards by which we must measure the quality of our technological and industrial progress. And herein lies the criterion for a potential partnership with the US, the European Union and other economic blocs.

In simple terms, any partnership with, say, Europe, should aim at enhancing our access to European markets. Increasing export capacity, however, involves more than negotiating increases in quotas and more favourable customs exemptions. We want a partnership in progress, not simply a greater share in the profits of European progress. If we are ever to achieve self-sufficiency our partnership with Europe and the US must include the technological transfer necessary to allow us to plant our feet firmly on the ground of constructive development. We need investment, technical and financial support, not just customs exemptions. And if this proves not to be forthcoming from one particular bloc, then the onus is on us to pursue other potential partners.

Any partnership is, of course, a two-sided endeavour. We too have a part to play, which will require will and intelligence in accommodating the changing realities that will come to constitute the world of the coming century.

Can Zionism be revamped?

With a comprehensive Middle East peace in sight, Israel is preparing a revamped version of Zionism. **Mohamed Sid-Ahmed** questions whether the attempt can be credible

This year, Israel will celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Theodore Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), in which the founder of modern Zionism launched the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine to save the Jews from persecution and pogroms in Europe. According to Israel's prime minister, Shimon Peres, this is an opportunity to re-appraise Zionist ideology and adapt it to the requirements of a new situation in the Middle East. The attempt to consolidate the foundations of Israel's moral and historical legitimacy is further enhanced by Israel's decision to celebrate the third millennium of the existence of Jerusalem, originally the capital of biblical Israel.

The whole enterprise is questioned by many scholars, who point out that the existence of Jerusalem predates that of biblical Israel by some two thousand years, confirming suspicions that these festivities have more to do with Israel's political future than with its cultural past. If the Peres government succeeds in achieving a breakthrough in negotiations with Syria before the coming Knesset elections this summer, it will certainly project its success as bringing about a qualitative leap forward in the status of the Jewish state. For the first time since its creation in 1948, it will enjoy recognition and contractual peace agreements with the bulk of its Arab environment. Ironically, this faces Israel with a quandary: how can it embark on an enterprise to revamp and update Zionism at the very time it is embarking on an enterprise to convince the Arabs of the need to abandon their traditional perception of Zionism as the ideology which justified dispossessing them of their land and creating an alien body in their midst, and to

regard it as no less legitimate an ideology than the Arab ideology of national liberation and pan-Arab unity?

There are already forces in Israel who see peace arrangements with the Arabs as a betrayal of the original Zionist project. Yigal Amir, the assassin of former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, justified his act on the grounds that the principle of exchanging land for peace which Rabin accepted is tantamount to a surrender. For a wide Israeli constituency, any compromise with the Arab states, even for the sake of peace, is incompatible with Zionist ideology. The Likud, Israel's main opposition bloc, condemned Amir's terrorist act but not the reason for which he perpetrated it. How can revamping Zionism be made possible at the very time the opponents of the ongoing peace process see it as curtailing Zionism and betraying its objectives?

Peres and other Israeli politicians committed to the peace process talk of the need to develop an understanding of Zionism transcending its previous negative image in Arab eyes. In the belief that Zionism need not stand as an impediment factor in the face of a comprehensive peace or a Middle Eastern market, or, more generally, Middle Eastern integration and compatibility. But such an endeavour conceivable and practical?

From the start, Zionism has been the ideology by which the creation of the Jewish state was justified, whatever the attitude of its Arab environment and however intense their hostility towards it. By its very definition, Zionism cannot subordinate Israel's identity to the aspirations and requirements of its environment. On

this crucial issue, Amir and Netanyahu, the Likud leader, are more consistent, or at least more open and honest, than Zionists like Peres who are trying to reconcile the irreconcilable.

True, ideologies have proved to be much more flexible and adaptable to changes to the political environment than the formalism of their teachings would suggest. In the case of communism, for example, common ideology did not prevent the outbreak of wars between Communist states, like the Chinese-Vietnamese war in the seventies and the skirmishes that could have escalated into all-out war between China and the Soviet Union at about the same period. Italian communism as elaborated by Gramsci, Togliatti and Berlinguer was markedly different from Stalin's, Guevara's, or Mao's versions of communism. Thus ideology does not presuppose in all circumstances immutability, inflexibility, total rigour or self-consistency.

But the question with Zionism is more complex. By definition, it is concerned only with the fate of the Jewish people. By definition, it subordinates everything to that all-exclusive objective. How can Zionism give precedence to the interests of the Middle East — taken as an integral whole — over Israel's intrinsic interests? It is all very well for Peres to talk about the ethical and humanitarian values of a revamped Zionism and to present it as compatible with, and not irreducibly hostile to, the Arab environment. But this will not convince the Arabs that the leopard has changed its spots, that Zionism has essentially changed in nature and that it will now be able to give satisfactory answers to the issues raised above.

The games of yesterday

By Naguib Mahfouz



Between the ages of seven and ten I remember taking great care to meet daily with my friends in Al-Husseini. So much so that it seems strange to me now that I have lost touch with them all. Indeed, though I remember family names, there is only one of my early playmates whose first name I remember.

He was the son of a police commissioner in Al-Gamaliya. His name was Hemmam. Though we subsequently lost touch some relatives have told me that he is now a judge. I remember visiting his family with mother in their house near the police station. Hemmam and I used to play in the square next to his house, which at that time was perfectly safe since there were no motor vehicles.

The square was like a playground. I remember how we used to wait for the cart that twice daily would cross the square, pulled by two mules. With the other children I would run happily after it.

At the age of ten we moved to Al-Abbassia and my circle of friends expanded. At the same time I began to show an interest in sports, particularly football. I remained in touch with members of the team, some of whom I still meet though sadly most of them have now passed away.

Based on an interview by Mohamed Sahnay.

The Press This Week

By Gail Nassar

Too early for optimism

AT THE start of the week, negotiations on the Syrian-Israeli track dominated the press. The banner headlines of the national dailies were devoted to optimistic statements made by US President Bill Clinton and French President Jacques Chirac on the outcome of the talks.

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مركز الامم المتحدة

Close up

Salama A. Salama

The future of neglect

When the Venice opera house caught fire a few days ago one of the city's landmarks was reduced to rubble in a matter of hours. Thousands of Italians watched helplessly as the "jewel of Venice" was turned to ash.

The Italian press was quick to point out just how vulnerable Venice's architectural treasures are to fire. The Venetian fire brigade is hampered by a lack of access. Alleyways are narrow and canals do not give ready access to many sections of the city. The brigade is itself under equipped. In addition, the construction of the buildings themselves, and their close proximity, gives cause for concern. The city is, in short, a fire fighter's nightmare.

What applies to Venice is, unfortunately, somewhat applicable to Cairo. Both cities are of ancient foundation rich in architectural treasures. Both, too, are the victims of an insidious and creeping neglect. In the case of Cairo, though, the dilapidation that is so shockingly apparent in the city's historical quarters has crept into neighbouring districts, mostly working class. It is surely only a matter of time, though, before the more affluent districts are similarly afflicted.

Touring Cairo's old districts used to be one of the highlights of Ramadan. Yet anyone undertaking such a tour now cannot but be impressed by the extent of the neglect to which these sections of the historic city are subject. The architectural fabric of some of the city's oldest and historically most significant areas is literally being eaten away. What, then, are we to make of the pronouncements of those optimists who expect to see Cairo become the centre of a resurgent Middle East, replete with all the investment, banking and cultural services such a preeminent regional role would demand? They will surely receive a rude awakening once the summit conference on cities to be held in Istanbul in a few months gets underway.

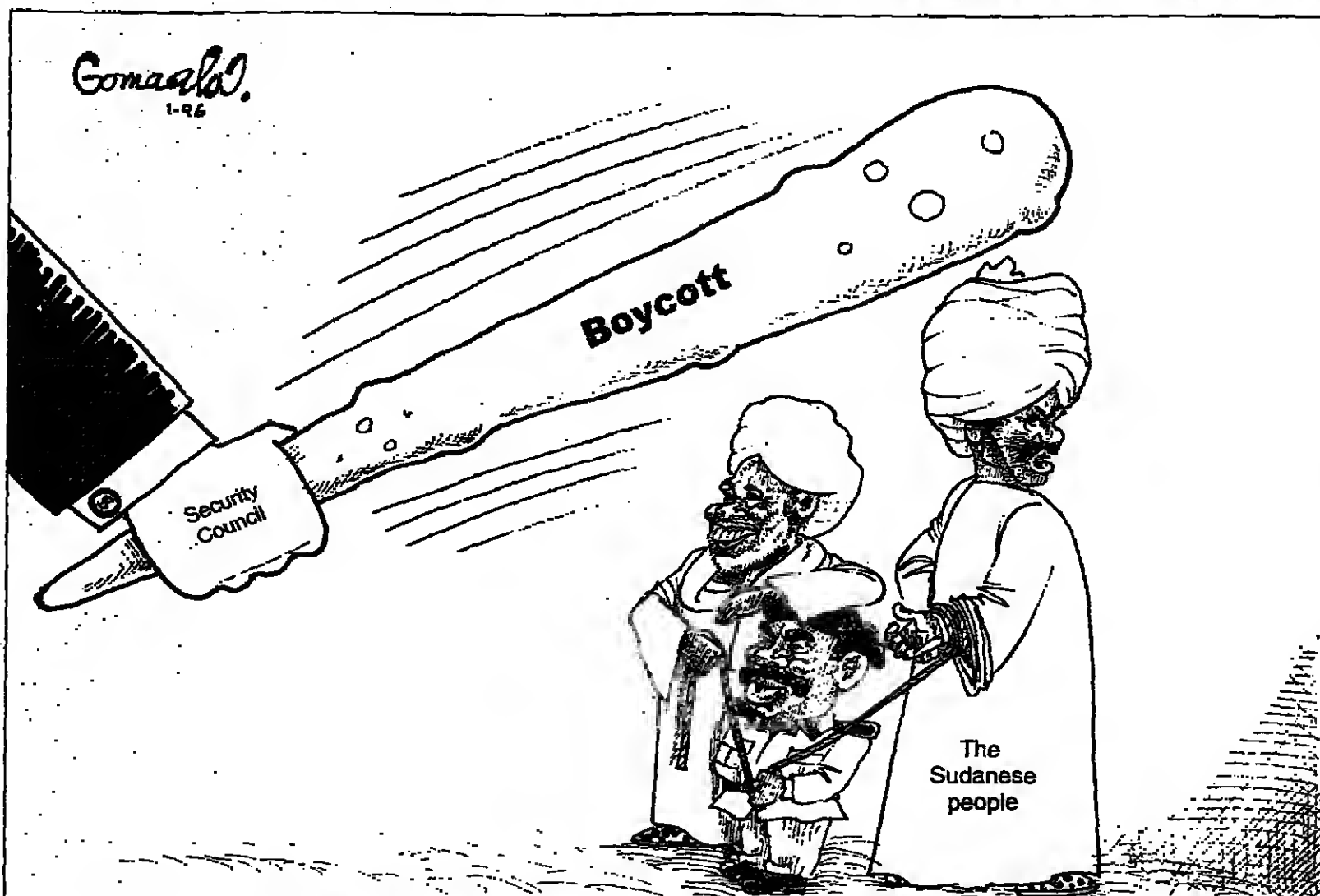
Ancient cities like Cairo face enormous problems. They are expected to absorb vast numbers of rural immigrants and diversify their economic activities in order to accommodate their burgeoning populations. But if the demands placed on Cairo are ever to be met the city must undergo a radical transformation in its organisation and administration.

Like many other historical cities, Cairo, home to so many monuments from many different periods, has reached crisis point. Unlike Venice, however, the major threat to Cairo is not fire but the neglect that has led to an escalating pollution that eats away at the surface of buildings and a rise in levels of subterranean water that erodes foundations. The number of road vehicles in the city multiplies at an alarming rate. Small workshops huddle around the walls of ancient buildings and are allowed to burrow into the foundations of buildings that in other cities only pedestrians would be allowed to approach.

Yet even if we put the very specific problems engendered by the concentration of such large numbers of unique and irreplaceable buildings in one city aside, Cairo faces other, equally pressing dilemmas. Even those districts that do not boast a wealth of monuments appear to be paralysed. Streets are used as garages with the result that ensuring smooth traffic flow has become an impossible task. The city has come increasingly to resemble an ailing heart, replete with many arteries clogged and failing. Cairo is well set to become the most polluted city in the world. Hardly a commendable achievement, and one that will have enormous ramifications for the health of the city's population.

What can be done to save Cairo from such a dismal future?

This is an issue that warrants priority on the agenda of Prime Minister Ganzouri. A special committee must be created to draw up a working plan to save Cairo from ruin and destruction, for nothing less than radical action is capable of saving the mother of the world.



Under the glare of illusion

By all appearances the first Palestinian election results constitute a major victory for Yasser Arafat. Voter turnout reached an average of 80 per cent, of whom 88.1 per cent voted for Arafat as president of the Palestinian Authority. Some 75 per cent of seats in the 88-member Palestinian Council went to Fatah candidates. International monitors, a veritable army of whom arrived in Gaza and the West Bank, testified that there was no rigging or coercion at the polls except in East Jerusalem where the Israeli government used various ploys to discourage or prevent voting.

The PLO leader was quick to interpret his victory as vindicating the peace he has made with Israel. The world, especially the western world, enthusiastically applauded. Appearances are, nevertheless, deceptive. The election represents a smaller victory for Arafat than all the hoop he would lead one to suppose. Nor does it, by any means, represent an automatic endorsement of the Oslo agreements.

Exclamations over the large turnout are uncalled for. Throughout the twentieth century people who have been denied this fundamental right have exhibited an unusual enthusiasm when first given the chance to vote. In the era of decolonisation this phenomenon was in evidence throughout much of Africa and Asia. More recently we have witnessed election fever in both Russia and South Africa. So the large turnout in the West Bank and Gaza was predictable.

Several observers have noted contradictory factors which explain Arafat's impressive victory. With the exception of the *Christian Science Monitor*, which published a highly suggestive analysis by Norman Finkelstein (31 January 1996) a Jerusalem based scholar, the American media has ignored informed voices in favour of projecting the

Palestinian election results do not imply an endorsement of Oslo, and despite the jubilation, there is both more and less to Arafat's success at the polls, writes Eqbal Ahmad

election results as a popular Palestinian endorsement of the 'peace process'. But among the factors which contributed to the election's outcome the following should be noted.

First there was the absence of a viable challenger. No one remotely as well known as the PLO chairman ran against him. His sole challenger was Samiha Khalil, a brave but little known social worker, 72 years old. She is the first Arab woman in history to run for president. Given the discrepancies of history, fame, resources, and access to officially controlled media between the 'father of the Palestinian nation' and his humble challenger, the surprise is not that Arafat was the overwhelming winner but that Samiha Khalil garnered nearly 10 per cent of the total vote. Had someone better known — for example Dr Haider Abdel-Shafi, who headed the Palestinian negotiating team in Madrid and Washington — run for president, Arafat's margin of victory would certainly have been smaller. A critic of the Oslo agreements and Arafat's negotiating strategy, Dr Abdel-Shafi received the most votes among the candidates for the Council.

Expectations and symbolism must also be taken into account. Many Palestinians hope that Oslo 1 and 2 will eventually lead to the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, an expectation nurtured by the European and American media and the rhetoric of western leaders no less than by Likud's opposition to the accords. Yasser Arafat is viewed by most ordinary people in the West Bank and Gaza as the leader capable of steering the accords to-

wards statehood. As such, he enjoyed a preference.

To his advantage, Arafat is a master in the modern Arab art of creating popular political illusions. Unlike other contemporary Arab politicians, he does it with meagre resources, employing a combination of rhetoric and symbols. As Norman Finkelstein aptly points out, Arafat has once again produced an "extraordinary array of illusions". He is a president without a country, leading a government which enjoys not one attribute of sovereignty, commands an army without frontiers and a diplomatic corps without a state. The Israeli and American governments appear amenable to granting him the symbols of statehood without its substance. The ultimate cost of all this to his people may be as great as that inflicted on the Iraqis by Saddam Hussein and the US. After all, the land on which Palestinians have been promised autonomy is less than three per cent of Palestine. And even this meagre area is being restricted by the government of Israel into a network of enclaves.

Then there is patronage. Arafat has not been granted the 'widerworld' to run even an embryonic state but America and Europe are investing him with the power and resources of patronage. With appointments to a bloated bureaucracy which includes no less than a thousand "directors" and "advisors", and a police force of 30,000 headed by 13 major generals, he has bought loyalties among notables and tribal chiefs. They can deliver votes and shows of support for some time to come. Moreover, Fatah is reported to have spent lavishly on the elections. Finkelstein

cites a figure of \$1 million in Hebron alone. Where patronage is widespread and central to the political process, repression exists just below the surface. Reports abound of employees and beneficiaries of the PA (Palestinian Authority) being coerced to support Fatah's state.

There exists, too, justifiable anxiety about economic prospects. Since 1948, when it became a Palestinian refuge, Gaza has presented a picture of concentrated misery. The West Bank looked less grim and its inhabitants ate better. But since 1992 living conditions have declined in both places. Many families depended on relatives who worked in the Gulf. After Desert Storm Palestinian workers were expelled en masse from many Gulf states. In liberated Kuwait they were also subjected to abuse and brutality. A large number of Palestinian families were also dependent on income earned from the daily export of both goods and labour to Israel. But since the Oslo accords Israel has regularly prevented such commuters from entering Israel. In this harsh economic environment, then, the livelihood of Palestinians is more than ever dependent on foreign aid. Arafat, they know, is the surest pipeline for that aid.

It is also important to realise that the Oslo accords did not figure prominently in the campaign. The main opposition parties — Hamas on the right, and on the left the "Democratic" and "Popular" fronts — boycotted the election. The leftists asked instead for a silly symbolic gesture — "don't hurry the cause in the ballot box". Hamas offered armed resistance as the alternative. It

put up posters of Yehya Ayyash, recently assassinated by the Israeli secret service in Gaza, as a counterpoint to the PLO leader. Typically, Arafat attended Ayyash's funeral, identifying with the martyr, and his cadres picked up the signal. Fatah's candidates generally blurred the electoral picture by speaking as though they were opposed to the Oslo accords, insinuating that their party needed a governing mandate to transform the accords into something else. Many projected themselves as Arafat's antagonistic collaborators, men who would guarantee 'internal democracy' and assert sovereign Palestinian interests. So in the end the electorate had a choice of persons not politics, individual and clan interest not national interest. The dice was loaded in Arafat's favour.

Even so, wherever an independent candidate posed a viable challenge he/she beat the Fatah candidate. Thus Hanan Ashrawi, known the world over as the spokesperson of the negotiating team in Madrid and Washington, was elected to the Council. She is a critic not only of the Oslo accords but also of the deteriorating human rights record of the Palestinian Authority.

The Oslo agreements have yielded little benefit to the beleaguered Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and none whatsoever to Palestinians in exile. Their future remains as bleak as ever, their difficulties, if anything, compounded by the agreements. Yet, the election of January 1996 is likely to be remembered as a landmark event in Palestinian history, if only because it allowed a people that had long been denied a voice the right, finally, to represent themselves. "At long last, their *sawt* or voice", wrote the Palestinian novelist Anton Shammas in the *New York Times*, "became politically audible, for the first time in their imposed history."

Ganzouri's luck

By Salah Montasir

Watchers of Egyptian ministerial history have observed that Dr Kamal El-Ganzouri has been favoured by circumstances when he took office. His predecessor, Atef Sidki, had already solved or alleviated many problems.

He has unified the exchange rate and has effected an unprecedented reduction in the budget deficit. No longer lacking sources of foreign currency, the banks have an unprecedented degree of liquidity. Nor is there cause to complain of excessive inflation.

Terrorism has been virtually brought under control, both at home and abroad. There is a general perception that the psychological climate, and hence the economic climate, is stabilising. Tourism, which had been adversely affected by terrorism over the pre-

vious five years, should continue to recover and develop into a prime source for investment.

Egypt's relations within the Arab World, as well as with the international community, are very strong. For example, Minister of Information Safwat El-Sherif's recent visit to Saudi Arabia to meet with Saudi officials and representatives of the press helped resolve one of the issues that had clouded Saudi-Egyptian relations: the public flogging of an Egyptian doctor last spring.

Finally, the private sector is showing encouraging signs of healthy growth. Whereas the development of the private sector had been one of the major worries of previous

governments, there are now numerous successful private enterprises, which, combined with the stable economic climate, have inspired greater confidence in private-sector investment.

Given this very positive background, El-Ganzouri will not have to waste precious time solving dire problems. Rather, it will be his task to follow through on the excellent progress that has been achieved and to rectify any faults that have occurred in the process. Perhaps this explains the rapid pace of decision-making that has characterised El-Ganzouri's government so far. He is simply making minor adjustments to a course the foundations of which have already been secured.

New window of opportunity

By Heba Handoussa

Egypt's potential for taking off has never been better, now that major structural problems have been overcome and that a number of positive prospects can be forecast for the future. At the macroeconomic level, stability has been achieved: inflation is below 10 per cent, the decline in the budget deficit to 1.6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product is expected to be sustained and foreign currency reserves have reached \$18.5 billion (18 months of imports) providing a cushion for any fluctuations in the exchange rate.

At the international level, export markets are booming in many high-value-added agricultural and manufactured goods which Egypt already produces. Both the Uruguay Round and the European Partnership provided important avenues for increasing Egyptian penetration, especially of European Union and US markets. Another major trend is that transnationals from Europe, America and the Far East are increasingly interested in Egypt as a manufacturing location, and Egypt stands out as having one of the most highly skilled and cheapest labour forces in the region. The huge domestic market also provides an attractive home base for multinational investors.

Looking to the future, there is every reason to believe that the economy is picking up and that growth rates are on the rise, as evidenced by indicators of construction activity and electricity usage. The challenge is to provide the private sector with sufficient confidence to embark on new investment and to better utilise existing capacity. Although structural reform of the price, trade, investment and competition regimes has been highly successful over the past five years, these were not sufficient to restore an acceptable growth rate because of weak investor confidence. Egypt must exploit its many achievements to date so that development is in line with its largely untapped potential: its large and highly diversified industrial base and its emerging capital market.

The year 1996 presents a window of opportunity for the new cabinet to coordinate its efforts towards presenting the image of a dynamic and decentralised Egypt that is ready to embark on sustained rapid growth. The strength of the present cabinet is that its members have been committed to the comprehensive reform programme both in its design and

execution, and careful policy management can be expected to continue over the foreseeable future. Moreover, the power of the executive over the legislature — the fact that parliament is largely drawn from the ruling National Democratic Party — means that any additional legislation can be passed with little resistance. The onus is, therefore, on the cabinet to implement the necessary remaining set of reforms that can ensure a significant increase in the credibility of the government and the reform process.

Policy changes that can have a significant impact on Egypt's image are far easier to undertake than those accomplished to date. On the legislative front, laws, regulations and procedures must be revised so as to make the labour market more competitive and to eliminate bureaucratic red tape that hinders economic activity and raises transaction costs. Other policy changes that come to mind are: full convertibility of the Egyptian currency, revision of intellectual property rights and freedom for fully owned foreign trading companies to operate in Egypt. These and other similar actions are needed to provide evidence that the government is serious in promoting private-sector competition, foreign investment and economic efficiency.

Indeed, the stage is set for rapid growth that is export-driven with potential annual increases in manufactured exports of over 30 per cent for the foreseeable future. Growth needs investment, especially private investment of the kind that has a large multiplier effect in generating jobs and incomes, and diffusing the benefits regionally and across income classes. Export-led growth is precisely of that type, and Egypt could easily quadruple its exports to reach \$4 to \$5 billion over the next 10 years. Investors, foreign and domestic, need confidence. There is nothing magical about the successful countries with sustained growth records that have made the transition to which we aspire; their one common approach was giving economic performance priority over political standing.

The writer is professor of economics and head of the Cairo-based Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey.

Reflections By Hani Shukrallah

It does turn

The earth is round, it is not the centre of the universe, and "it turns". The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, as late as the mid-1970s, issued a *fatwa* that maintained that in accordance with Islam the earth was flat, that the advocates of its roundness were Western atheists and secularists who wanted to destroy Islam and other revealed religions, and that for a Muslim to adopt this idea was to fall prey to blasphemy and apostasy.

I must confess that I have not been following the ideas of the Saudi Mufti on the earth's shape, or anything else for that matter, and they may have changed since the '70s. He was back in the news more recently, however, when he issued a *fatwa* to the effect that it was *not* contrary to Islam for Muslims to visit Jerusalem while under Israeli occupation.

Now *fatwas* — be they in the realm of science, politics, or anything else — are, by definition, based on texts of the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings, *Hadith*. A *fatwa* is supposed to determine the position of Islam, and hence, of God, on a certain subject. And *fatwas* may cover anything they choose to. For we are told by the self-appointed spokesmen for Islam, and hence for God, that unlike the "Render unto Caesar..." alleged origins of secularism in the Christian West, Islam is *deen wa dunya*, religion and everyday life. This notwithstanding the highly familiar ring — in Christian/Western terms — of religious rulings on the earth's shape.

As it happens, I find myself in disagreement with the two above mentioned rulings of the Saudi Mufti — not so religious, but respectively on scientific and political grounds, in both cases determined by what I believe to be the application of reason and experience.

The new *hesba* law, passed by parliament nearly two weeks ago in an attempt to halt the wave of so-called *hesba* cases against writers, journalists and artists, establishes, in its explanatory note, the legal rule that: "Every Muslim has the right to alert a judge, informing him that an encroachment has taken place against the right of God Almighty, or against those rights in which His right prevails, and to testify before him as to the occurrence of this encroach-

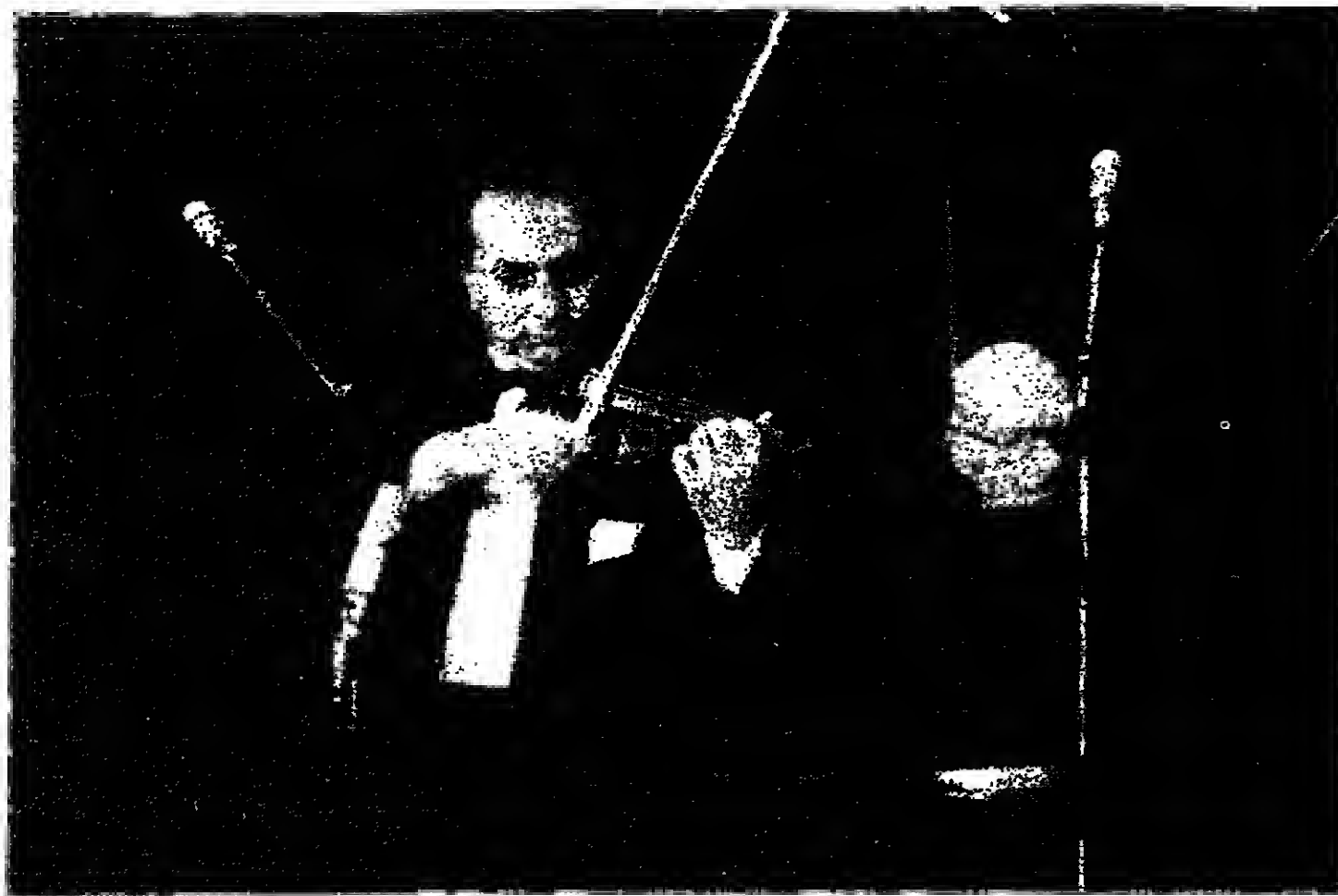
ment, in order to take appropriate measures to correct it, once it is proven."

So, in what has become standard style, the government set out to foil the Islamists' hoisting of a particular banner, by legitimising it — subject to government controls. In this case, we are supposed to be thankful that pious-Islamists such as a certain Cairo University professor or a certain uniquely-turbaned Maadi sheikh, cannot take their accusations of blasphemy and apostasy directly to court. They first have to submit them to the state prosecution authorities, which decide to press charges or not.

The real question, however, is where in does God's right lie? A citizen's right to appeal to the judiciary is demarcated by the Law of the Land. For instance, Egyptian law prohibits torture, so presumably a citizen has the right to initiate legal proceedings against persons who commit this transgression. Indeed, in so far as religious values guide people, and their parliamentary representatives, in drawing up legislation, such a law is well and truly in the spirit of religion.

But what about the earth's shape. Religious texts, in Christianity as in Islam, may be, and have been, read to indicate that the earth is flat, stationary and lies at the centre of the universe. Would the advocacy of an alternative "theory" such as that the earth is, more or less, round in shape, turns around the sun and revolves upon its own axis, and is a member of a tiny galaxy in a limitless and centreless universe, be tantamount to an encroachment on God's right?

True, most sane prosecutors — and one must assume sanity in the prosecution authorities — will not initiate proceedings to divorce a teacher from his wife, for telling his class that the earth is round. This, despite the fact that no less a religious authority than the Mufti of the home of the two holiest shrines in Islam, deems it otherwise. But why are the "rulings" of our own myriad of religious authorities — self-styled or official — on any subject, in science, politics, culture, etc. any less questionable than those of the Saudi Mufti. And in the absence of laws defining it, what prosecutor or judge is entitled to tell the rest of us, wherein lies God's right?



Hassan Sharara

A sip of honey

David Blake files with the bees

Cairo Symphony Orchestra; Hassan Sharara, violin soloist; Sayed Awad, conductor; Main Hall, Cairo Opera House; 2 February

Music is moving so quickly that anything which does not immediately suggest the present suggests the past. And the past certainly reared its head in this concert which, halfway through Ramadan, comprised a programme of works by Egyptian composers of a generation ago. All the pieces performed were honourably attached to the Egyptian music scene of yesterday, their tonality and design clinging tightly to systems which are no longer viable or expressive of what is now going on. They take their time to come to conclusions which are not really there at all. History is not actually unkind to them if only because all the music performed was well worked and honourably intended. It is not that they are not even old-fashioned, just that they seem to have no fashion at all.

We are hearing more of Gamal Abdel-Rahim these days. His struggle to achieve a position of duality in the twentieth century, his merging Egyptian and contemporary European music, means that his compositions see and feel both worlds. However closely knit they become, the tension is there. He provides the outlines of the path that other adventurous spirits might follow.

The music of this concert, however, came to us perfectly sure of itself, representing what it supposed was totally Egyptian, yet producing an effect of the European idiom. Intention and result were not in agreement. What we heard was as Egyptian as a travel film. It was enjoyable but is that enough to ask? It was like a photograph of a scene long gone.

El-Ser Hoda is an overture though the programme did not make clear to what. It was built on Sayed Awad's usual pattern — straightforward tune, noticeably Oriental, then a careful block by block building of repetition which forms the basis of a musical piece — a form. It moves vertically, never expanding horizontally. We therefore moved slowly in a form which really demands speed. As a consequence we took a great deal of time getting nowhere at all.

The feeling in the *Overture* was repeated in another piece, the famous *El-Yarmouk Symphony*. Before this symphony, we had Attia Sharara's *Second Egyptian Concerto for violin and orchestra*, with Hassan Sharara as soloist. This was another manner. Maybe it was written with the composer's son's particular talents in mind. Unfortunately no details were given in the programme.

There is an old song, *I hear you calling me*, about a bird of the high mountains whose voice was so clear and beautiful it came directly down through space to the disconsolate lover beneath. Hearing it, he was heartened and cheered. This was Sharara's way of playing last night. He is a big man, light on his feet. During the ups and downs of the concerto, without actually moving his feet at all, he suggested, as he swung and raised himself to the demands of the phrases, that he was dancing. A great sign — the best. He was giving as well as taking enjoyment. And because he wanted to show his pleasure the entire concerto became pleasurable. Nothing impeded the message of Sharara: Sing with me, be happy. I'm happy too. The audience responded, even though in Ramadan symphony concerts are seldom the public's chosen venue of delight. But those who did not turn up to this concert missed a demonstration of what the violin is capable of if you love it. Sharara can be a cool one, wrapping himself in imperial chill if he is not into the music or wishes to stand outside it. But his generosity usually wins the day. For this music he allowed his taste for giving full reign.

Violinists are changing. Beautiful tone used to be paramount. No longer. The demands of twentieth century music almost discourage it. There is not much provided these days that allows fiddles to be beautiful. One has to be amazed, petrified, horrified and almost anything, save perhaps breaking your instrument, is more acceptable than a lovely tone. Even the classics no longer demand it. But Sharara has a beautiful tone. It is that simple. It exudes from the instrument like honey. What is he to do with it when fashion no longer demands it? He goes on, not serenely, because he is conscious of its beauty.

The tone is one of his entitlements. Possessing it is like being handsome. You can only shrug your shoulders and say, so that's what I'm like. In some contemporary music this is a disadvantage, though it can always win the day with an audience. Beautiful tone can bring even the serialist to heel. Pulchritude may be on its way back.

We had plenty of it in Attia Sharara's concerto, though it is not a long piece. As the opening began, composer and violinist displayed a distinct musical personality — firm, commanding and endlessly varied as to tone changes. This music had flow. It never ran out of melody or the means to display it. The violinist revelled in his moment.

The second movement was a long song, undulant, inviting and what used to be called romantic. Does this always work in 1996? It does if handled so easily and with command of its true message — ease, beauty, something Egyptian to withstand the daily news. It relates to Egypt without straining for visual picture postcard details. No reference to the Nile — everyone knows that it flows on, but not with this colouring. No flaming dawns or sunsets. Something more to do with light — an afterglow and a breath of things from other worlds outside time.

This short concerto never hung around. Time-wise it was on the spot. We, so composer and violinist seemed to say, had better go and let the audience see what the other guests have brought. But said to see it go. The last movement brought a whiff of the gypsy fiddler, of the Brahms attitude to the violin. It brought a feeling of Budapest to Cairo. And always there was this tone, softly singing, totally audible at all volumes and in the highest registers. No vibrato used at all — silky, sexy and the tone beams as direct and piercing as a light from a laser beam. Sharara is a tone idiom. It was moonlight and roses all the way.

The other guest at the party was Sayed Awad and his *El-Yarmouk Symphony*, called *Symphony No. 1*. It has been played before in the Big Hall and itself is big. Really big. Time and size wise. The planning is big. Bruchner's symphonies have the same vertical sky scraper dimensions. Europeans call them mountains. You climb the

peaks as he shows them to you. But even Bruchner at times spreads his music out horizontally, offering change to the listener.

This symphony is also called *The Battle*. It is in four long movements, divided into separate enclosures in which minute forms follow the big blocks that set up the monumental building.

The movements do not suggest change. They are too abstract for that, too vertically conceived. Awad's themes are good. A tune commences, it is given slowly and clearly, then given with a different colour and approach. And so on, movement by movement. The steps are clear, the overview is without detours and the form is inexorable, rather like his *Death of Cleopatra*: People and legends come, stay then move along, and all the while a plodding destiny carves everything to fit its own image. It is sad music, never pompous or dominating, slow and big like a pyramid. But you cannot do much with a pyramid except look at it. It is like history. And so is the *Yarmouk Symphony*. It is a historic presence, a happening for which there is no name. It is unstinting, its surface never breaks and it yields not a fraction to human weaknesses for variety and movement. It makes you feel inferior. But does all this represent anything Egyptian?

The *Yarmouk Symphony* is like the Sears building in Chicago. It can go on forever for 900 floors. You get in the lift and the button is pressed. We have passed floor 30 — and still it goes on and on to 400. It goes on passing a few hundred more than at last the top. Get out. There should be a view at least. No view. Too high for view. But down there, far below, seethes a great city. Let's go down and back. Whatever else, something's happening down there.

The *Yarmouk Symphony*, coldly monolithic, is not very apt music for Ramadan, which is joyful and all about tomorrow. And tomorrow is rooted in the millions. Who won the battle of the *Symphony No. 12*? Not the listener who is with the people. Even Bruchner said whatever you do with your soul, keep your feet on the earth. Where does that place *Yarmouk*?

A vast collection of Islamic arts and crafts including *mashrabiya*, lustreware ceramics, textiles, woodwork and coins, drawn from Egypt's Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods and other countries in the Islamic world.

Islamic Museum
Port Said St, Ahmed Maher St, Bab Al-Khalq, Tel 390 9930/390 1520. Daily exc Fri, 9am-4pm. Fri 9am-11.30am & 1.30pm-4pm.

Museum of Modern Egyptian Art
Opera House Grounds, Gezira, Tel 340 6861. Daily exc Mon, 10am-1pm & 3pm-5pm. A permanent display of paintings and sculpture charting the modern art movement in Egypt, from its earliest pioneers to latest practitioners.

Mohamed Nagui Museum
Chateau Pyramids, 9 Mahmoud Al-Ghundi St, Giza. A museum devoted to the paintings of Mohamed Nagui (1888-1956).

Mahmoud Minktar Museum
Tahrir St, Gezira. Daily exc Sun and Mon, 9am-1.30pm.

Toyour Al-Zalam (Birds of the Dark)
Director: Sherif Arafa. Although the first few scenes suggest the film will revolve around one central character, superstar Adel Imam does not actually mind sharing the limelight with Riad El-Kholi.

The film centres on the pervasiveness of corruption as a means of oiling the wheels of promotion. Fatih, a lawyer from the countryside, begins the film as a shy opportunist and continues that way, as his career undergoes a meteoric ascent. After assisting a prominent lawyer in a big corruption case, he ends up in charge of a minister's (Gamal Rabea) electoral campaign. Fatih soon becomes head of the minister's office, using his newly found patronage to further both his career and inflate his bank account.

His rise is mirrored by that of a fundamentalist lawyer (Riad El-Kholi), the only difference being that the latter has chosen an outlawed organisation to promote his ambitions.

The film ends, predictably enough, by pointing an accusing finger at both the establishment and the fundamentalists. Corruption, you've guessed it, is rife in both camps.

Mohamed El-Assiouty

Hani Mustafa



Apollo 13

A long night ahead, but what to do? Al-Ahram Weekly looks at the late night films playing throughout Ramadan

Apollo 13 mission — one more hiccup in the great American Dream — provides the basis for Howard's film where, it seems, Murphy's Law has moved into space and anything that can go wrong will go wrong. The fate of three astronauts hangs on an ever thinner thread as employees back at mission control smoke ever greater numbers of cigarettes, drink ever increasing amounts of coffee, and gradually lose control.

Whether NASA's supervision and assistance was weak or the production designer idle is unclear, but with the exception of Apollo 13's launching scene, the many shuttles and movements in outer space are far from plausible. On the other hand, the special effects used to suggest zero gravity have been attained, with objects and astronauts gliding about inside the space shuttle, were convincing enough.

While Apollo 13 looks likely to reap the second largest box office returns of 1995, Tom Hanks may well be on his way

to a third Oscar.

Braveheart
Director: Mel Gibson. Over three hours *Braveheart* narrates the superhuman heroism of William Wallace, ordinary chap turned rebel in the cause of a free Scotland. The script sinks beneath the weight of its own didacticism, denouncing tyranny, injustice, betrayal and weakness while extolling sacrifice and glorifying martyrdom. It certainly glorifies producer, director and lead actor Mel Gibson. After watching Wallace in a heroic display of courage and endurance, his suffering and charismatic struggling for his cause and his success with women, Mel Gibson suddenly becomes a universal hero, an example of how everyone should be.

As a child, he witnessed the massacre of his father and brother. He marries in secret, so as to escape the tradition whereby the nasty English lord can exercise the right to sleep with any of his feudal subjects on their wedding night. When his wife is killed, Wallace's rebellion against English tyranny becomes inevitable. And so the gory, grisly battle scenes and the extravagant action sequences begin. They continue till the end of the film, punctuated by occasional tear-jerking moments, when Gibson turns his sad eyes to the camera and flexes his bulky biceps. Wallace's final decapitation scene as he cries freedom prompted more sympathy from the audience than anyone could ever have dreamt.

Waterworld
Director: Kevin Reynolds. *Waterworld* is set sometime in the future, when the entire planet appears to have shared the sunken fate of Atlantis. Among the survivors of the deluge, who live on anything that floats, is Kevin Costner. He has, conveniently enough, mutated into a gilled creature. He risks his life to save a kidnapped child, which turns out to be fortuitous since the child in question is tattooed with a map that shows the whereabouts of the only piece of dry land remaining on earth.

Apollo 13
Director: Ron Howard. The dramatic failure of the

Listings

EXHIBITIONS

To The Oriental Sources of French Cultural Centre, 27 Sabri Abu Alam St, Heliopolis. Tel 417 4324. Daily 10am-2pm & 7pm-9pm. Until 15 Feb.

Ossama Mohamed (Glasswork) and Ahmed Amawi (Calligraphy), Extra Gallery, 3 Al-Nessim St, Zamalek. Tel 340 6293. Daily exc Sun, 11.30am-2pm & 8.30pm-11pm. Until 17 Feb.

Chairs, Mashrabiya Gallery, 8 Champollion St, Downtown. Tel 778 623. Daily exc Fri, 11am-8pm. Until 18 Feb. Chairs designed by 26 Egyptian artists.

Ramadanat, Salama Gallery, 36/A Ahmed Orabi St, Mohandessin. Tel 346 3342. Daily exc Fri, 10am-2.30pm & 7pm-10pm. Until 18 Feb.

Works by Elhamy Naguib, Abdel-Fattah El-Badri, Esmat Dawood, Fares Ahmed, Farouk Wajdi, Mohamed Ibrahim, Mohamed El-Tahar and Mohamed Youssef.

Alberto Burri, Zamalek Centre of Arts, 1 Al-Mahad Al-Swissi St, Zamalek. Tel 340 8211. Daily exc Fri 10am-1.30pm & 7.30pm-11pm. Until 25 Feb. Sixty works by the artist exemplify his artistic itinerary through graphics.

Alfred Stieglitz (Photographs), Sony Gallery, AUC, Al-Sheikh Rihan St, Tahrir. Tel 337 5422. Daily exc Fri & Sat, 9am-12pm & 7pm-10pm. Until 29 Feb.

An exhibition of work by Alfred Stieglitz, celebrated American photographer. Stieglitz pioneered the use of cameras in the snow and rain; the first to photograph skyscrapers, clouds and airplanes and was one of the pioneers of colour photography.

Yasser Alwan (Photographs), Ewart Gallery, AUC, Al-Sheikh Rihan St, Tahrir. Tel 337 5436. Daily exc Fri, 9am-6pm. Until 6 March.

The Museum of Mr and Mrs Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil, 1 Kafour Al-Akhdid St, Dokki. Tel 336 2376. Daily exc Mon, 10am-1pm & 7.30pm-11pm. Egypt's largest collection of nineteenth century European art, amassed by the late Mahmoud Khalil, including works by Courbet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Manet and Rodin.

Egyptian Museum, Tahrir Sq, Downtown. Tel 375 4319. Daily exc Fri, 9am-2.30pm; Fri 9am-11am & 1.30pm-2.30pm. An outstanding collection of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic treasures and the controversial mummies' room.

Coptic Museum, Mar Gergis, Old Cairo. Tel 362 8766. Daily exc Fri, 9am-3.30pm; Fri 9am-11.30am & 1pm-3.30pm. Founded in 1910, the museum houses the finest and largest collection of Coptic art and artefacts in the world.

Islamic Museum, Port Said St, Ahmed Maher St, Bab Al-Khalq, Tel 390 9930/390 1520. Daily exc Fri, 9am-4pm. Fri 9am-11.30am & 1.30pm-4pm. A vast collection of Islamic arts and crafts including *mashrabiya*, lustreware ceramics, textiles, woodwork and coins, drawn from Egypt's Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods and other countries in the Islamic world.

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A permanent collection of works by the sculptor Mahmoud Minktar (d 1934), whose granite monument to Saad Zaghloul stands near Qasr Al-Nil Bridge.

FILMS

French Films, French Cultural Centre, 27 Sabri Abu Alam St, Heliopolis. Tel 417 4324. *Le Lien Du Crime* 8 Feb. 8.30pm. *L'Etrange Monsieur Victor* 12 Feb. 8.30pm. *Agent Trouble* 14 Feb. 8.30pm.

Spanish Films, Spanish Cultural Centre, 20 Adly St branch, Kodak passage. Tel 360 1743. *Letters From The Parc* 8 Feb. 8.30pm. *Summer of Mrs Forbes* 13 Feb. 8.30pm. *Fable of Palm Guardian* 14 Feb. 8.30pm.

Cinemas change their programmes every Monday. The information provided is valid through to Sunday after which it is wise to check with the cinemas.

Nine Moons, Cairo Sheraton, Galaa St, Giza. Tel 360 6081. Daily 1.30pm, 8.30pm & 11pm. *Al-Salam*, 65 Abdel-Hamid Badawi St, Heliopolis. Tel 293 1072. Daily 1pm, 8pm & 11pm.

Waterworld, 35 Talaat Harb St, Downtown. Tel 393 3897. Daily 1pm, 10pm.

Monkey Trouble, Al-Haram, Al-Haram St, Giza. Tel 385 8358. Daily 12.30pm, 2.30pm & 9.30pm. *Karim I*, as above.

Apollo 13, Normandy, 31 Al-Ahram St, Heliopolis. Tel 258 0254. Daily 12.45pm, 7.45pm & 11.45pm. *Ramsis Hilton I*, Corniche Al-Nil St. Tel 574 7436. Daily 11am, 2pm & 9pm.

Al-Haram, Al-Haram St, Giza. Tel 385 8358. Daily 12.30pm, 2.30pm & 9.30pm. *Karim I*, as above.

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Honoured on her last public appearance at the National Theatre, Fatma Rushdi was a woman who lived and not merely existed; (right) The final touches before a powerful performance in *Al-'Azimah*

Down Sunset Boulevard

Nehad Seleiha chases the elusive legend of Fatma Rushdi, the Sarah Bernhardt of the East, who died last month

And so she is dead — the legendary Fatma Rushdi, the Sarah Bernhardt of the East, as she was dubbed; and how she cherished the title. She made a smooth and graceful exit without the convulsive harangues and heroic declamations that usually accompanied her famous death scenes on stage. In fact, it is one such death-scene that indirectly launched her onto her glorious career as the first woman founder of a theatrical company in the Arab world. It happened in the mid-20s when she was a member of the prestigious Ramses Company, founded by the equally legendary actor and director Youssef Wahbi after his return from Italy. When the company's prima donna, Rose El-Youssef, left the company to pursue a career in journalism and founded the publishing house that still carries her name today, Rushdi became the female lead. Naturally, the choice incensed the young female members, some of whom had joined the company before Rushdi. There was a lot of spite and bitter-backbiting. Amina Rizq, Rushdi's colleague at the time, admits to this. "She was the wife of the company's director, Aziz 'Eid, and we naturally thought this was behind her choice as leading lady," she says. "It was not until we saw her in the leading parts that we had to admit, however reluctantly that she was truly great," she adds. One night, however, just as Rushdi was coming to the end of an inordinately long dying speech, and building up for a grand finale before collapsing into the arms of her four female attendants, one of whom was Rizq, she caught sight of one of the attendants, the beautiful actress Zeinab Siddi, imperceptibly lifting a hand to her mouth to suppress what Rushdi thought a giggle but was in fact a yawn — induced by the long, silent vigil. She insisted that Youssef Wahbi kick the culpable attendant out, and when he refused (the actress in question being an asset to the company at a time when female acting talents were scarce) she walked out, taking the husband along.

Together they set up their own company which carried her name. It was not easy, and, financially, it was an uphill struggle. At one time, they had to auction some of their furniture, and it is doubtful that the project would have taken off if a certain wealthy gentleman, by the name of Elie Adu'i, had not suddenly and miraculously materialised. Rushdi has described their first meeting in her memoirs and in several interviews. She met him at a nightclub where she had gone to meet an acquaintance who had promised her a loan. She and 'Eid were down to their last penny. The loan was not forthcoming, but the acquaintance pointed out to her the rich, Jewish businessman and told her to try him. Proud as ever though neither a pauper, Rushdi insisted that he come to her table and introduce himself. By the end of the evening he had agreed to sponsor her company and arranged to meet her the following morning to settle the matter. On reaching home, she discovered that he had slipped five hundred pounds (a fortune in those days) into her bag without telling her. The next day, Mr. Adu'i took his beautiful protégée round the shops, outfitting her as befitting her future status, and finished off by opening a 12,000-pound bank account in her name.

For seven years, the amorous sponsor continued to lavishly fund the company, not minding the heavy losses in terms of cash returns. Thanks to him, Rushdi was able to indulge her wildest acting dreams, performing many

classical female as well as male parts, including *Cleopatra*, *La Dame Aux Camélias* and *Hanin*, and touring Egypt and the Arab world with her performances. Everywhere she went she was received with rapturous adulation and given red-carpet treatment. As her reputation grew, she began to become a legend. It was during those years that she was called the Sarah Bernhardt of the East; another cherished title was 'the friend of students' which she earned on account of her giving free performances for students on certain days. She also became something of a patriotic figure for her attacks on the British occupation of Egypt which led to the closing down of her theatre once or twice.

The poor, little Alexandrian girl who was driven by poverty to the stage at the age of ten had come a long way. She was the only actress in her time to receive bouquets tied with strings of real pearls, as the legend goes.

Sayed Darwish had been the first to discover her talent; he heard her sing one night in Alexandria with her troupe of Amin Attallah and advised her mother (who had joined the troupe with her three daughters after the death of her Yugoslavian husband) to take her to Cairo, the land of golden opportunities. In Cairo, she presented herself to Naguib El-Rihani to work for his company and there she met Aziz 'Eid, her future tutor and husband, and life-long mentor, friend and loyal companion. 'Eid took to her at once and set about educating her (since she couldn't even read or write) and polishing her talent; he brought her several teachers and coached her himself in acting and drama, lavishing on her his long experience. When he finished with her, she had perfect elocution and an impressive artistic range. Predictably, Pygmalion-like, he fell in love with his creation and they married when she was 15. The marriage cost 'Eid his religion since she was a Muslim and he a Copt.

How 'Eid felt about the liaison between Rushdi and her newly acquired 'mobile bank' (as she, somewhat callously, described her rich patron in an interview) is impossible to know. He was much older than Rushdi, of course, and knew that however much she respected him as an artist and trusted him as teacher and friend, she had married him primarily to further her career. She admitted once that she has never really been in love, that her passion for theatre had engrossed her totally, leaving no room for any other passion. One tends to believe her. She seems to have regarded men as useful props that enhanced her performance, and Adu'i was no exception. 'Eid must have realised this. Eventually, however, as

toogues began to wag, creating a malicious din, he was forced to make the difficult decision of divorcing her for both their sakes. But their friendship emerged from the crisis unscathed and their professional partnership continued until 1934 when the sponsor withdrew and the company finally went bust. The valedictory performance was *Salome*, played by Rushdi (who else?) and directed by 'Eid.

Rushdi's company was not the only one to go bankrupt in the early '30s. It was a period of real crisis for the theatre and most troupes were disbanded. There was suddenly a glut of out-of-work actors. To provide them with employment, the government founded the first Egyptian national theatre company; but Rushdi, too independent to be run by anybody but herself, did not join it and turned her talents to the silver screen. Her association with the celluloid world had started as early as 1923 when she produced, wrote and directed a two-hour silent movie called *Marriage* in which she starred with Mahmoud El-Meligui. Her first talking movie was *Fajr b' Fawq Al-Haram* (A Tragedy At The Top of the Pyramid) in 1926, and her last was *Da'uni A'ish* (Let Me Live) in 1955. In between, she did 14 films of which the most important and memorable is *Al-'Azimah* (Willpower). During the shooting, she married the film's director Kamal Selim; but the marriage was short and turbulent due to Selim's violent, unreasonable jealousy. They broke up and she

Unlike Amina Rizq, her old colleague in Ramses company, who is still very much active and around in films and on television, Rushdi could not adapt to the changing world around her, except old age, and, with it, smaller parts. Rather than play second fiddle, she opted for seclusion and led a frugal life on her meagre pension from the Actors' Union. The state honoured her twice, in the reigns of Nasser and Sadat, and the American *Life* magazine celebrated her achievements on four pages in 1964. But medals and magazine articles do not pay the bills. She had saved nothing, except her memories, and her overriding sense of pride and dignity. When she could no longer afford a flat in Cairo, she moved to Suez where she seemed to slink without a trace. She surfaced briefly in 1993 when Karam Metawe', as head of the State Theatre Organisation then, decided to honour her on the Egyptian Theatre Remembrance Day. That night, she forgot her wrinkles and sat in her box, in a pink dress, with short, puffed sleeves, smiling and waving excitedly to everybody. It was heartening and pathetic all at once. In 1995, she was back in the news, but, sadly, as a poor and aged actress who could not pay her hospital bills. It transpired that prior to her hospitalisation she had been living for months in a shabby, dingy pension in downtown Cairo. It was shocking, scandalous, outrageous, many artists felt: they rallied round her and bought her a flat in Ma'rouf Street. But three days after she moved into it, and after a long look at the old haunts of her youth out of her window, the magnificent Rushdi quietly slipped away. It was a peaceful, lonely death, behind the curtains; but, by God, what theatrical timing!

I was fortunate to meet Rushdi at the National Theatre one month before she died, at a gathering held in her honour by the National Centre of the Egyptian Theatre. She looked shaky and fragile, but deeply happy. She obviously enjoyed being surrounded by fans and admirers. I thought how cruel her lonely life in Suez must have been. But as I looked at her carefully henna-dyed hair, fully made-up face and bright green suit I found myself quizzically musing on the delightful, eternal vanity of actresses and divas. Then she started talking, retracing the past, and it felt as if she was growing younger by the minute, lightly shedding off the years as she went on. When we asked her at the end to act for us a short scene from her repertoire she paused for a few minutes, then reeled off in a warm, full-blooded voice, 80 lines from the final scene of Ahmed Shawqi's verse drama, *The Death of Cleopatra*, without a single error or hesitation. She held us in a spell and gave us a taste of the overpowering vitality and charisma that enthralled her lucky audiences in the past. Looking back on that evening I cannot help feeling that Rushdi was really then reciting her own farewell speech, not Cleopatra's.



"Fatma Rushdi...the poor, little Alexandrian girl who was driven by poverty onto the stage at the age of ten had come a long way. She was the only actress in Egypt to receive bouquets of flowers tied with strings of real pearls"

Fatma Rushdi, theatrical legend, surrounded by members of her troupe and student admirers

Books

Feminism in situ

Feminists, Islam and Nation (Princeton University Press, 1995) by Margot Badran

Margot Badran's elaborate account of the rise of Egyptian feminist awareness and public activism, *Feminists, Islam and Nation* is particularly timely in the sense that it revives key themes pertinent to contemporary feminist debate. Coming to terms with feminism's cultural specificity and confronting the post-feminist backlash are two such themes dominating today's gender discourse.

By tracing the history of feminist consciousness through the experiences of pioneer Egyptian women, Badran wisely confines her investigation to an Arab, Islamic and Third-World feminist. However, *Feminists, Islam and Nation* is not simply a historical account of Egyptian feminism. It is an investigation into the inextricable link between feminism as an organised movement and national changes. The author skillfully weaves a tapestry of gender and national-cultural awareness, and in the process underscores the futility of looking at one without the other.

It is hardly coincidental that both Egyptian feminism and the modern Egyptian state began to take shape at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The struggle against colonialism loomed large in the consciousness of the pioneers of Third World politicised organisations. The Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), created in 1923, a year after Egypt gained formal independence, was no exception. Women's associations were engaged in the twin struggle for national

independence and women's empowerment. Badran's account gives an insight into the manner in which their exposure to governments and states on various levels to further gender causes advanced the politicisation of the movement.

The Egyptian feminist movement widened its circle as pan-Arabism gained ground. The year 1945 saw the birth of the Arab Feminist Union (AFU) and the League of Arab States. However, while Palestine was a member of the AFU, it was excluded from the Arab League since it lacked independent sovereign status. "Arab feminism was also, in part, born out of the limitations of international feminism," writes Badran, in recording the events of the 1939 Copenhagen Conference of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW). Badran highlights the different outlooks of Western and Eastern feminists. The IAW's preoccupation with the Jewish problem at the expense of addressing the violations of the national rights of Palestinians in Copenhagen in 1939 exposed the Eurocentricism of the IAW.

However, while feminists may be affected by their different histories, they share common features. By exploring the memoirs of pioneers like Hoda Sha'rawi and Nabawiyya Musa, Badran tells the story of how women became feminists. She does this by achieving a delicate balance between individual and public activism. Gender awareness usually begins with an awareness of the difference

between the lives of men and women. Which feminist cannot identify with Hoda Sha'rawi's distress by the preferential treatment given to her brother which drove her to question her identity as a daughter and reach the conclusion that she was not her mother's daughter but the daughter of a slave girl who died? And how many women have not agonised over the prospect of facing what Nabawiyya Musa called the "double burden" of combining a demanding and male-dominated marriage and an equally demanding career?

As the author points out, the term "feminist" is applied to women who do not necessarily adopt this identity explicitly. It applies to those who by virtue of their "ideas, agendas and actions contributed to feminist awareness." It also includes those who were engaged in what Badran calls "everyday feminist activism."

However, the overriding common factor amongst women like Hoda Sha'rawi and Nabawiyya Musa is education, be it formal or informal, for which they both strove to advance. Armed with education, their vision of gender awareness matured into a discourse which expressed itself in writings, individual efforts, and eventually organised feminism, without which Egyptian feminists could not have been incorporated into a wider regional structure.

Today, several decades after Sha'rawi first unveiled her face in public in 1923, the return to the veil has been attributed to a male backlash. But any

kind of post-feminist backlash must be seen in the context of national-cultural resistance. For instance, Badran notes that in the Egypt of the '30s, the veil was not used as a cultural defense, unlike in Algeria where French colonial attempts at assimilating Algerians made the veil a symbol of colonial resistance. At present, the return to the veil can also be seen as a backlash against the patriarchal domination of the state and Western economic and cultural hegemony. Nonetheless, most women would agree that wearing the veil must always remain a Muslim woman's prerogative. Commenting on past "veiled battles", Badran writes, "[Egyptian] women decided for themselves if and when to unveil."

Many Third World feminists are branded as Western agents whose ideas came out of western historical experiences. In the genuine quest for women's equality, there is little room for discrediting one kind of feminist for overlooking the other's interests, or blaming another for absorbing alien concepts. Needless to say, feminists in the Islamic world have to contend with a different set of laws and traditional conventions, particularly in personal status law.

Another controversial issue is fear lest identity politics be detrimental to gender causes. Does fighting separately for women's rights imply a lack of awareness of the socio-economic symptoms which affect all people regardless of their gender, race or religion? The author of *Feminists, Islam and Nation*

maintains that Egyptian feminism was an independent discourse that engaged indigenous patriarchy and patriarchal colonial domination. Women's and other organisations were subjected to attempts by the state to bring them under its control. Even after formal independence in Egypt, the feminist movement did not escape the patriarchal domination of the state.

Badran's history of Egyptian feminism underscores the link between education and economic and political empowerment. Hence, *Feminists, Islam and Nation* focuses mainly on the activities of upper and middle-class women who were the pioneers of the EFU. In this sense Egyptian feminists transcended class barriers. They also joined forces and lobbied for better conditions for working women, mostly from the informal sector. Their main contribution has been in expanding the ranks of professionals who make up the bulk of the middle class. However, Badran's work does not claim to be an analysis of women from the modest strata of society.

Pondering the various issues raised in *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, reinforces the conviction that identity politics and national causes are not in conflict. Ultimately, a feminist is a politicised woman who has to deal with patriarchal forces in the family, the state, society, and across borders — on an individual and a collective level.

Reviewed by Samia Nikumrah

Plain Talk

Watching the sun rising over Lake Nasser I could not but think of Akhenaton's *Hymn to the Sun* and feel that it was no surprise that he called for its worship. There I was standing on the upper deck of a boat, caught between the Nile waters and the rays of the sun, realising that I was blessed by these two life forces which have been the source of inspiration for many writers, poets and composers.

It was a memorable experience, standing on deck, my eyes following the disc of the sun as it slowly emerged from the east and my mind registering the significance of the pharaoh's use of it as a symbol for life itself. The sun, Akhenaton's hymn sings, has created and sustains of the whole earth:

"Thou createdst the earth... for men, cattle, all flocks... Thou shinest on the eastern horizon/ And fillst the whole earth with thy beauty/ Thou art beautiful, great, dazzling, exalted above every land/ When Thou shinest they live, when Thou settlest they die, Thou thyself/ Are life-time, and in thee do they live."

As creator, the sun holds and exercises absolute power over his creation. He is "lord of what was created and what exists" and his beams "have brightened the earth in its entirety, every heart is happy at the sight of Thee, for Thou art risen as their lord."

With the rising of the sun, which was believed to be the moment it opened its sleepy eyes, all came to life again for a new day. Ra' had awakened, and so must everything else. When the sun set, however, instead of going back to sleep, it was actually getting ready for its nightly struggle in the domain of darkness and the dead. Every night the sun, aided by the loyal Osiris, had to fight the frightful serpent, which wanted to destroy the world of the living and, more than ever, destroy Ra'. And every night, Ra' won and conquered evil.

And so the sun was the protector and the Nile the sustainer of life. They were the two indispensable elements that secured the continuity and the prosperity of the Pharaoh's domain.

And so, with the gliding of the boat, my thoughts strayed, but I was brought back to reality with our arrival at Abu Simbel, the temple towering majestically over the lake. The statues of Abu Simbel seemed to cooey to the world of Ramses the Great a message about his unrivaled power and authority.

The awe-inspiring architecture of the temple and its colossal statues conferred upon this monument the status of guardian of the land, protecting and defending Egypt. Once inside, one sees Ramses' glory embodied in that most impressive of murals depicting the battle of Kadesh and the victory over the Hittites in minute detail.

Visiting Abu Simbel and other Nubian monuments and listening to our charming guide Azza recite the ancient glories, I was deeply curious to find out how these great monuments might have inspired our contemporary writers.

Mursi Saad El-Din



The Egyptian village: a source of fond memories belied by present conditions

photo: Ahmed Abdel-Razek

Time for a rural overhaul

Often deprived of the most basic necessities, Egyptian peasants have fed the nation for millennia, yet rarely reaped the fruits of their work. Zeinab Abul-Gheit examines recent efforts to bring development to the village

According to reports from the Ministry of Agriculture, 96 per cent of Egyptian villages are supplied with electricity, but only four per cent of villages have sewers, while 57 per cent of villages are not supplied with drinking water. "We lack the most basic necessities. There is a high rate of kidney failure among the inhabitants because the water is so polluted," says Ayoub Ramadan Ayoub, an Arabic teacher in Sheikh Osman village.

Poverty, illness, illiteracy: these are the plagues of Sheikh Osman and thousands of other villages across the country. The Organisation for the Reconstruction and Development of the Egyptian Village (ORDEV) has spent the past two decades elaborating a national programme for rural development throughout Egypt. According to Milad Hanna, a professor of civil engineering and former head of the housing committee of the People's Assembly, "The tragedy of the rain floods, in November '94, that devastated the Upper Egyptian governorates, killing hundreds and driving thousands from their shattered homes, could have been avoided if Egyptian villages were planned and constructed according to scientific criteria." Buildings are constructed haphazardly in rural areas, he adds, according to practices thousands of years old. Peasants still live in one-storey houses that shelter the family and their animals, storing supplies on the roof of these mud huts. Streets are narrow and unpaved. Buildings in the village are not constructed in accordance with Ministry of Housing regulations, and construction licences are issued by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Hanna calls ORDEV a "cosmetic" system which aims at improving only the image of the village without bringing about any real change, and lacks any strategy for distributing inhabitants of rural areas more rationally. "I have recommended many times that rural housing should be part of the general housing plan. Otherwise the housing policy will be lopsided," he adds.

After the floods in Upper Egypt, Hanna urged that all the villages around Minya, Assiut, Sohag and Qena be relocated, and that those hardest hit by the floods, which virtually eradicated all the houses in some areas, should simply be demolished. New sites should be chosen in suitable locations at some distance from arable land, and buildings should be designed according to modern planning standards: wide streets and domed, vaulted stone houses. Hanna strongly encourages a labour-intensive approach to reconstruction, whereby large numbers of young people would be engaged as manual labourers.

Ibrahim Muharram, chairman of ORDEV and the founder of the National Programme (Shurug), contends that a plan for the reconstruction and development of Egyptian villages was worked out and ratified by the Cabinet and the People's Assembly. Muharram says that implementation began in 1994 and is scheduled to last seven years. The plan's basic aims are the reconstruction of the rural infrastructure, the improvement of education and health services, human resource development and projects to improve the condition of women and children. Muharram notes that total investments for implementation amount to LE57.6 billion, of which LE15 billion are contributed by the government, LE15 billion are made up through the inhabitants' participation, LE12 billion consist of loans from Egyptian banks and LE15 billion are loans from Arab and foreign countries.

"After the Upper Egyptian villages destroyed by the floods, priority will be given to those villages most deprived of services, and villages of which the inhabitants expressed the most willingness to participate," says Muharram. In vil-

lages where over 200 homes were destroyed, businessmen and the armed forces will bear the costs of reconstruction; in those villages where the damage was not as widespread (fewer than 50 housing units destroyed), the costs will be borne by the inhabitants under the local authorities' supervision. The owners of the houses are provided with building materials for free, and a sum of money intended to cover labour costs. The government bears the costs of the utilities. Half the total area of each unit is devoted to the construction of a house including one to three rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Animals are kept in the remaining half. Instead of the unbuilt brick normally used in many rural areas, the houses are made of cement, stone or baked bricks, according to the material most readily available on-site.

But will the reconstructed villages be vulnerable if flooding recurs? Yehia Abdel-Hadi, chairman of the department of geophysics at Cairo University's Faculty of Science, says: "Maps were drawn up of the mountainous areas in order to define the danger threshold. Satellite images are also being used in order to define the safe sites for agricultural and industrial development." The floods in Upper Egypt caused the National Programme to be rearranged, placing the hardest-hit villages on the top of the list for development. In May 1995, President Mubarak laid the cornerstones of six villages in Upper Egypt, including Duranga in Assiut, where the damage was greatest and where 344 new houses were constructed. Between 300 and 600 houses were built in each village, as well as a health unit, a service centre, and commercial centre and a primary school. According to ORDEV's reports, 10,605 houses had been planned for Assiut, Sohag, Qena, Luxor and Minya as of last summer. 1,993 were actually delivered, 3,537

constructed, and 5,275 are still in the process of being implemented. Infrastructure projects in the villages devastated by the floods were carried out to improve drinking water, sewage networks, roads, electricity, telecommunications, general services, sports, cultural and religious facilities, costing a total of LE51 million. Projects involving rural women were implemented in Minya and Assiut to increase health, cultural and environmental awareness and to train women in income-generating projects. At the beginning of 1994, 778 economic projects had been set up by the local development funds, each project providing on average four new work opportunities, at a total investment amounting to almost LE50 million.

Ali Hebeish, president of the Academy for Scientific Research and Technology, attributed the current interest in the development of Egyptian villages to a basic aim: the transformation of Egyptian villages from the role of consumers to that of producers. The academy has been doing its bit for the rural areas: between 1971 and 1991, LE100 million were spent by the academy on industrial and agricultural projects, perhaps the most important of which was the rice campaign carried out between 1978 and 1992, which brought a surplus of one billion pounds to the national income. Besides these campaigns on the national scale, genetic engineering and organic technology were used in developing new strains of plants resistant to salinity, drought and common crop pests. Animal and plant waste was transformed into biogas energy, successfully replacing the fuel traditionally used in cooking. "My aim is to make the village grow on a scientific basis," says Hebeish. "I want to teach the farmer that national progress is achieved through science."



Kitchen talk

When my husband and I decided to get married, both our families placed bets — separately — on how long it would last. The most generous put it at six months. Actually, if we had been thinking in terms of permanence, neither of us could have chosen a worse companion. But my husband-to-be was prone to irresponsible decisions, and I was into living dangerously. Trouble struck at once: the Thursday immediately following the wedding, to be precise. "You will have to be at the fish market at 6.00 am if you want fresh fish," my husband told me casually on that fated evening. "Get a medium-sized sea-bass and two dozen crabs. Make sure the crabs are alive."

I looked at him in disbelief: did he really expect me to go shopping for fish? I had never bought raw food in my entire life and the last time I had been up at 6.00 am was to go on a school field trip. Besides, my only relationship with crab was far had been one of eater to eaten, when I did the eating, and they — quite dead — submitted without protest. Mistaking my stunned silence for consent, my husband gave me advice on the characteristics of the Alexandrian fishmonger, traits of which, as a Cairene, I may not have been aware. Painfully recovering my wits, I proceeded to enlighten him on some characteristics of my own. Being his cook, his cleaning woman or his girl Friday were not among them I told him. "Hire people to do the housework," I recommended. "I am a career woman." He chose to ignore this bit of sound advice. In the Syrian-Lebanese community of which he was a proud member, women, he argued, were mother and housewives first. He was convinced, as far as I could gather, that keeping house and raising babies were actually their sacred duty. A job — not a career — could come later if — and only if — the need arose.

For the following several weeks my husband's extended family sent their female representatives to visit me on good-will missions: Vine leaves, kibbeh nayfeh (finely minced and specially seasoned meat, eaten raw) and lamb's neck soup cooked with tender loving care were the concrete manifestations of devotion and the essential ingredients of good marriages, they informed me. They offered their own lives as interesting examples of the genre. I politely ignored them and nibbled on cheese and crackers. They shook their heads, made disapproving sucking sounds with their thin lips and tottered out on uncomfortably high heels, only to be replaced by the next shift. Even taste Mathilde, the clan's matriarch, was roused to action by what the family considered downright untidy. In their family, no woman worth her salt had ever refused to cook for her husband. The pudgy males, often felled before their time by massive heart attacks, were living proof — so to speak — of this tradition. Tante Mathilde came armed with an overflowing shopping bag and her own pots and pans to rescue her favourite nephew from starvation.

She cooked a delicious meal in a little under six hours. "Will you come back tomorrow?" I asked her eagerly. "Will you let me teach you?" she inquired, patting me gently on the head. A note of triumph was clearly perceptible: she had succeeded where the others had failed. She alone — she would tell them — had known how to convince me. Who could resist her authority and good example, they would wonder, nodding approval. She smiled benignly, looking preternaturally in their admiration. "No," I said, "but I'll eat what you will cook." It had been a welcome change from my diet of dry biscuits. I do not remember seeing Tante Mathilde again.

My husband and I tried to work out compromises. We made concessions. He bought Camembert and French baguette; "I'll work and pay for a cook," I offered. Inevitably we would end up fighting, then go to a restaurant in an attempt to make up.

Our respective families exchanged covert, then overt accusations, each encouraging their own side to cut their losses. We were hopelessly deadlocked. What would his poor mother say if she could see him now, he would sigh, looking at the ceiling. He was sure she could not be resting in peace. "My father spent a fortune on my education," I would remind him coldly. "He would be delighted to have me back. In his house I will not have to slave away over a hot stove."

Each was generous with criticism of the other's family and lifestyle, in general and in particular. I, he told me, pointing an accusing finger, came from a decadent background. He, I answered, was disgustingly middle class.

Then, one day, Marcelle appeared. She was stunning, had a daughter my age, a successful career and a reputation for being an exquisite hostess. We became friends. I confided in her. I felt sure she would understand. She just laughed. "You can do everything, if you want to," she said. Cook, have a career, have dozens of children, even explore the Western Desert on foot if you so please." According to her, organisation was the password to a fulfilling life.

We went shopping. She chose a few items here and there. Back home we put some music on, and in no time the meal was ready. Thanks to Marcelle's wise counselling, during that first year of marriage, not only did I manage to bury the hatchet by acquiring acceptable — albeit unorthodox — culinary skills, whipping up three-course meals in less time than it took my husband's female relatives to soak their bulgur, I also found time to work and have a child. As she said, it's all in the organisation.

As for cooking, I had these lines pinned inside the first cookbook my husband bought me to celebrate our reconciliation: 1. What takes more than 20 minutes to prepare is not worth the trouble. 2. When in doubt, skip or improvise. 3. Replace unavailable ingredients with more readily accessible ones, using colour and flair. 4. Display cookbooks for credibility, not for use. 5. Whatever requires effort and/or time, abolish on the grounds that it is detrimental to the family's health.

Fayza Hassan

A jungle on your plate

Efforts are being exerted to decrease pollution, yet chemical and industrial waste still affects the food we eat, writes Reem Leila

A major cause of food contamination is the pollution of air, water, and soil. Food is described as contaminated when any chemical or organism in it reaches a level which is potentially harmful to human health.

Industrial and domestic waste is often discharged into water, in which harmful organisms may be broken down. But large amounts of untreated waste as well as certain chemicals cannot be detoxified. Contaminants therefore remain in the water, from which they are absorbed into the ecosystem and thence into the food supply. Water can also become contaminated as rain water passes through contaminated soil and drains into rivers and lakes.

According to Mohamed Abdel-Rahman, head of the soil pollution unit of the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), soil and plant contamination often occurs as a result of industrial or mining activities which produce poisonous waste. Often, this waste is not stored carefully,

sometimes, waste disposal sites are in close proximity to agricultural land. Other common sources of agricultural contamination are fertilisers and pesticides which are deposited on crops and may build up in the soil over a number of years. Substances such as cadmium can pass into human and animal food in this way. Food must be monitored for high levels of certain chemicals and even for low levels of contaminants which act as cumulative poisons. "Food must also be monitored for bacteria which may be present initially, or which may develop in food that is not carefully stored or processed," according to Abdel-Rahman.

As air, water, land, plants and animals are linked by a complex web of natural processes, contamination of any single element is likely to affect all the others. The contaminants from chemical leakage, for instance, or the radioactive substances released from nuclear accidents, can contaminate the environment, and hence the food supply, over a wide area for many years.

In Egypt, the diesel derivatives used in the ovens for baking bread, especially the unleavened bread eaten by most people, produce high levels of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and lead. Such pollutants react with the bread, causing cancer and damage to the brain cells, especially among children, in the long run.

According to Said El-Shami, economic counselor at the Ministry of Supply, bread eaten after being exposed to automobile exhaust fumes for an hour — not an unrealistic comparison, given the levels of pollution present in the baking process — will cause immediate dizziness. Therefore solar or natural gas must be used in the ovens.

Contaminants are often found in animals, particularly as a result of modern farming methods. "Drugs used in animal husbandry, to prevent disease and to promote growth, have to be carefully regulated to ensure that lev-

els in meat are safe for human consumption," said EEAA chairman Salah Hafiz.

Commercial and domestic cooking utensils have been identified as a source of lead and cadmium in food; and lead-based solder used in food tins is the major source of lead in canned foods.

"Not all food contaminants are man-made; some occur naturally in the environment," said Hafiz. Storage of fresh or processed food in warm or humid conditions, or in damaged containers, can lead to biological contamination. Bacteria are widespread in the environment and, if they are allowed to develop in food, can lead to disease such as listeriosis and to salmonella poisoning. Heating of food ensures that some bacteria are killed but, if this is not done at high enough temperatures for a sufficient period of time, toxic bacteria can remain in the food and cause food poisoning. Dr Kamal El-Din Hamza, dep-

uty minister of health, says: "Bacteria can be taken in by animals through their foodstuff, and infection passed from one animal to another. Such bacteria remain in meat even after the animal is slaughtered, and can pass into unprotected food stored near it."

According to Mohamed El-Zarga, representative of the EEAA, a national food monitoring programme must be set up to determine the extent of national food contamination levels and the risk they pose to public health; to prevent Third World countries from becoming dumping grounds for sub-standard food from abroad; and to advise other bodies monitoring food and environmental health conditions. "Severe sanctions must be imposed for the excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers. Non-hygienic ways of preserving food must also be banned for their adverse effect on human health," added El-Zarga.

Sufra Dayma

Potato and chicken fried fingers

Ingredients:
1/2 kg potatoes
1/2 kg chicken breasts
1/2 cup chicken stock
3 eggs + breadcrumbs (for coating)
Oil + dash of butter
Salt + pepper + allspice

Method:
Boil the chicken breasts same way as boiling chicken until tender and set aside. Boil the potatoes and mash them soft and set aside. Chop the chicken breasts soft in an electrical meat chopper or a blender, add the stock to moisten it and season. Add the mashed potatoes and mix well by hand until both potatoes and chopped chicken breasts blend well together. Season to taste, then form into fingers and leave aside. Beat the eggs and season, then cast the fingers and roll them over the breadcrumbs. Refrigerate them for 2 hours at least to rest, then fry them in steaming oil with a dash of butter until golden. Remove on kitchen blotting paper and serve hot with a rich green salad.

Moushira Abdel-Malek

Restaurant review

In the pink

Nigel Ryan goes to Maadi

La Casetta has several branches and though I seldom venture to Maadi — a matter of choice rather than distance — it was to the Maadi branch I went.

What can one expect from a restaurant with an Italian name in Maadi? Well, during Ramadan you can expect a more fulsome Egyptian atmosphere. You can sit in a tent and smoke shisha. This is possible, though, only during the Holy Month. For the rest of the year there is an absence of waterpipes. The tent is located in front of the restaurant, on the green carpet that during the rest of the year is tentless. And inside the restaurant proper, for four weeks of the year, the Ramadan theme continues. For a whole month the waiters get to wear galabiyas. The restaurant, in deference to the Holy Month, refrains from serving alcohol.

The interior is dimly lit and the walls wood clad, in the manner of a Swiss chalet. They are decorated not with posters but with painted copies of Impressionist paintings. The tables are reasonably spaced, and the seating comfortable.

In the past people have recommended the pizza at La Casetta, largely because they do not stint on ingredients. But there are occasions when less is undoubtedly best. Years ago I ate a pizza, though not at the Maadi branch, and though I would concur that there was no dint of topping, one needs a very hearty appetite to chew through it all. Fortunately the menu contains many other options, some of which do not demand the appetite of a horse, others of which intrigue, if

only because the descriptions are pointedly vague.

The menu lists both fish and shrimp in pink sauce. It is, of course, a commonplace for Cairene restaurants to be less than precise about fish. To specify just what sort of fish appears to move a restaurant into another league. It is the prerogative, though I do not understand why, of the seafood specialists. But fish in pink sauce?

It is all too mysterious. And the only way to clear the mystery up is to order the mystery item. Order we did. Predictably enough the fish in question turned out to be sea bass. And the pink sauce was shrimp sauce. Why, you may ask, not list the dish as sea bass with shrimp sauce? Why not indeed. The fish was, incidentally, perfectly fine. The sauce, if it could have used a bit of texture — it was smooth as could be — was also OK.

Occasionally, though, La Casetta does call a spade a spade. Filet comes in mushroom sauce, pepper sauce, and café de Paris. But the filet, whatever the sauce, has always been fine. Mozzarella Casanova turned out to be a mozzarella and tomato salad, with the scent on cheese rather than tomato. The pizza syndrome hit again with the result that you would have to be exceptionally fond of mozzarella to eat the quantities served.

The service at La Casetta is efficient, and if there is nothing about the food make one overly excited, it is never less than competent, and at the same time good value. Dinner for two, with soft drinks, was less than LE80.

La Casetta, Road 18, Maadi. Tel 351 9076

Al-Ahram Weekly Crossword

By Samia Abdennour

ACROSS

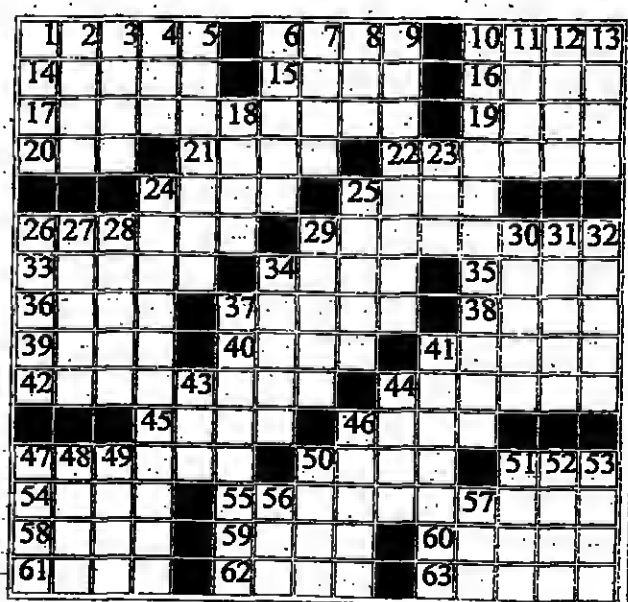
- Specks (5)
- Close heavily (4)
- Certain (4)
- Over (5)
- Theatre seat (4)
- Winglike (4)
- Free; released (10)
- Lodging houses (4)
- French summer (3)
- Mias McGraw et al (4)
- Natural (6)
- Take aback; hit like a tonne of bricks (4)
- Cancel correction (4)
- Unicellular sea weed (6)
- Small apartments (8)
- Nestness (5)
- Vessel (4)
- Last portions of small intestines (4)
- Wasteland (4)
- Animals; in the flesh (5)

1. Specks (5)
2. Close heavily (4)
3. Certain (4)
4. Over (5)
5. Theatre seat (4)
6. Winglike (4)
7. Free; released (10)
8. Lodging houses (4)
9. French summer (3)
10. Mias McGraw et al (4)
11. Natural (6)
12. Take aback; hit like a tonne of bricks (4)
13. Cancel correction (4)
14. Unicellular sea weed (6)
15. Small apartments (8)
16. Nestness (5)
17. Vessel (4)
18. Last portions of small intestines (4)
19. Wasteland (4)
20. Animals; in the flesh (5)

DOWN

- Manufactured (4)
- Record of date of person's death (4)
- Mislay (4)
- Vigil (3)
- Member of US legislative assembly (7)
- Wounded (5)
- Registers (4)
- Generation (3)
- Muse, contemplative (8)
- Holiness (11)

38. and void (4)
39. Weather directions (4)
40. Reign; principle (4)
41. University official with professional duties (5)
42. Brief surveys; summaries (8)
43. Woe; adversity (6)
44. Cow calls (4)
45. Facial spasmodic contractions (4)
46. Not apparent (6)
47. Accommodating (4)
48. Baton (3)
49. Chimney deposit (4)
50. Not divided into distinct parts (10)
51. Arab prince (4)
52. Looked (4)
53. Shipped as cargo (5)
54. Put faith in (4)
55. Camp shelter (4)
56. Aup emotionally (5)



- Arm bone (4)
- Be delicious (4)
- Highland Gaelic (4)
- Downcast (4)
- Bottom-line (3)
- Measurement of solid bodies (11)
- Work one's fingers to the bone (5)
- Vaults (5)
- Derisive (5)
- Poetic far down (5)
- Repulses (5)
- Escape from (5)
- Paver (5)
- Sortie; escapade (5)
- Melancholy songs of American Negroes (5)
- Person guilty of malicious setting on fire of houses (7)
- Type of vehicle (7)
- Edgar Allan (3)
- Fail to perceive (4)
- Infect; stain (5)
- Employer (4)
- Alaskan city (4)
- Stunt (4)
- Paradise (4)
- Make again (4)
- Tote, jumbled (4)
- Low sand-hill by the sea (4)
- Born (3)
- Squeeze into place force fully (3)

Nights of give and take

Ramadan nights are Cairo's version of "La Dolce Vita" — an endless array of arresting events, a sunset to sunrise where everything glows, and almost anything goes. Tarek Atia spends a night in the magic loop

It might start at 5.30 pm in Abassiya. Late for *iftar* (the meal which breaks the fast) again, you're inevitably trying to break the sound barrier, and probably surrounded by big red and white buses travelling somewhere unknown at the speed of light. If anything, the rapid pace helps you bear the entire call to *maghrib* (sunset) prayer, since each mosque you pass continues the *adhan* (call to prayer) where the previous one left off. After all, there are 2,282 mosques in Cairo, modestly called the "city of 1,000 minarets".

The streets, 15 minutes ago more jam-packed than they've ever been before, are now nearly devoid of cars, inspiring a tardy-martyr/trace-car-driver post-fasting haze. But this state of mind is bound to be interrupted just past Dar Al-Sifa Hospital.

There, every day at *maghrib* during Ramadan, three young men have volunteered to rush into the middle of the street and wave plastic cups at the cars zooming by.

Are they just looking to be roadkill? No, it turns out these brave souls are risking their lives to provide that first quench of thirst to all those "fasters" still a ways from home. The cups are filled with a delicious, nearly milky date juice, well-worth the 30 metre skid to barely avoid turning a couple of young do-gooders into human balsa wood.

6.15 pm — Ramadan is a time to be with family or friends for 15 minutes while everyone silently gobbles down huge quantities of food then rushes to grab the best seat in front of the TV. Once everyone is settled, tea is served and the room becomes womb-like and warm, as if everything were returning to the source. The game-shows and advertising jingles are completely familiar even though you've only seen and heard them once.

Inevitably someone will emit a forceful yawn, stretching every joint in their body to the breaking point, and a chorus of yawns will follow. Perfect time for a little nap. Lulled by the consumer's paradise on the screen, the napper always awakens with a start — "What, where am I?" only when some smart-aleck decides to turn off the TV.

At 6.15, in Dokki, Mohandesin, downtown and many other usually crowded places in Cairo, there is a complete and utter calm, surreal mainly because it's an impossibility. Is it really 6.15?

Yes, and at present, on this usually lively street, there is not a soul to speak of. Nobody around as far as the eye can see, except for the man in the garden in front of the Agriculture Museum, praying beneath the steadily darkening silhouette of a palm tree.

By 7.00 pm, or earlier, depending on the household, cigarettes are lit all around. A million flames ignite under kettles across the land. It's time to start making up for all the nasty habits we had to quit for 12 long hours. It's time to puff with a vengeance, slurp that Turkish coffee or sip a refined mixture of Al-Gawhara and Earl Grey.

As the smoke from the cigarettes mingles with the kettle's steam, look from face to face: it's like a child was lost at sea for days, but now he's back at home safe and sound.

8.00 pm. Qasr Al-Nil Bridge: The city is beginning to reawaken. It emits a different kind of yawn, as if the street lights on either side of the bridge were arms stretching out, gearing up for the long night to come.

A boy is standing between the cars at the circle in front of the Opera House, his face dirty, his clothes ragged. "You'd think people would be more generous during Ramadan, right?" he says with all the wisdom a 13-year-old can muster. "I'm afraid not." These days he earns less than LE5 a day begging at the intersections. He says when it's not Ramadan he usually makes 10. He thinks it's because people are generally in a better mood.

His father is dead and his mother doesn't want him around. He's now used to sleeping in the streets, and decides it doesn't matter if people are less generous because at least every night this month he can guarantee a free meal at *iftar*.

A fight is about to break out between the two teams playing five-on-five street soccer at 10.18 pm on an orange taran handball court right next to Cairo Stadium. These guys obviously take their annual Ramadan Stock Exchange Soccer Tournament very seriously. The teams represent different stock exchange companies, and according to Amar, the referee, "Luxor's got some crazy street kids out here tonight." The other team, representing Hermes Financial, has gone so far as to print up t-shirts with the name and logo of the company on them.

The stands are usually full of fawning wives and screaming kids but tonight, since Ahli is playing Al-Mehalla in the stadium, which is less than 100 metres away, and they're letting people in free, everybody has gone to watch the big boys play.

Even after Ahli beats Al-Mehalla 1-0, Hermes and Luxor continue to battle it out on the handball court. And for a brief moment, as the stadium crowd streams past them, you might imagine that the orchestra of noise-makers belting out "foot foot Ahli" were actually cheering on those sturdy 10 from the stock exchange.

When you gotta go, you gotta go. At 10.50pm, I decide to make my first foray into a top-notch Ramadan tent — you know, the ones that are all the rage this year. There's some trouble at the door, of course, since I just want to use the bathroom, but my suit, glasses and serious demeanor seem to convince the security personnel that I won't try anything funny, like try and get out of the LE40 minimum charge.

Still, I must be accompanied to the loo, which is at the far right corner of the tent. I walk by families and groups of young people sitting stiffly in a pseudo-Dahab cafe atmosphere, complete with mats, pillows and ragged but luxurious-looking Bedouin carpets. In those all too brief moments, I spy quite a bit of jewelry and sniff several vats of perfume. There is a band playing a trance-inducing, mantra-like melody and the air is heavy with incense smoke and cigarettes.

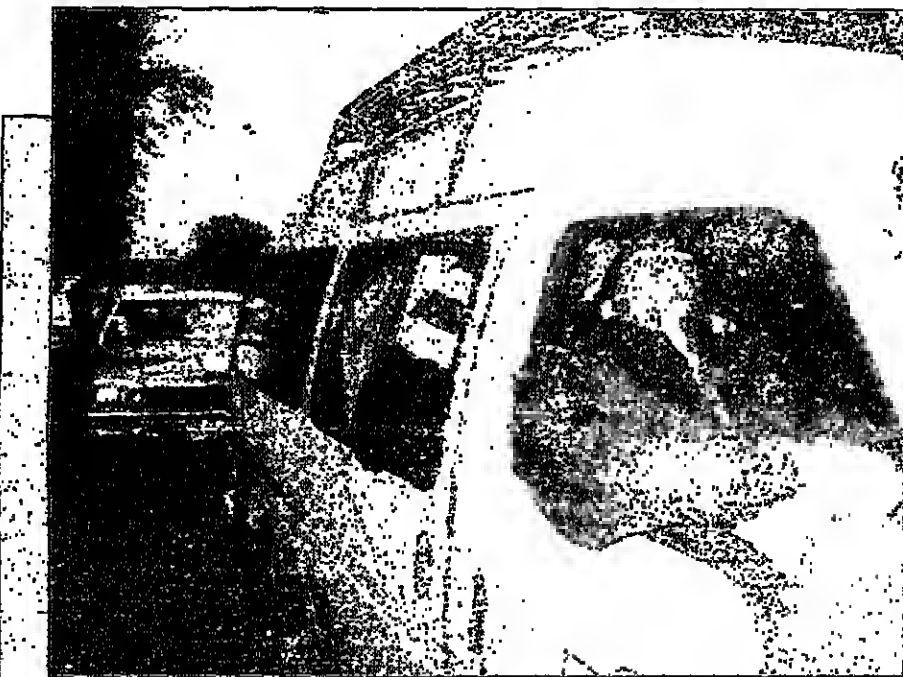
I am led through a vestibule brimming over with plants to the most elegant bathroom I've ever seen before in a tent. All ceramic and tiles. This must be how the sultans of yore relieved themselves, I think, before heading back out so that security won't get suspicious.

At exactly midnight I find myself trying to avoid being bit by the stray gunpowder bombs exploding everywhere around me. There are nine shooting galleries here in this alleyway behind Al-Hussein Mosque, and each features 2-300 gunpowder bombs hanging from a grid of metal wires, just waiting to be hit by perfectly aimed BB guns.

"People don't really aim all that well during Ramadan," says Ahmed Abdel-Qawi, who says marksmanship skills usually go up in the summertime, for some reason. I'm beginning to think Ahmed may have had a little too much *sahlab* (milky drink served with



Hagg Abdel-Moneim spends all night every night stirring the brew for tomorrow's free *iftar* meals. Once the glowing ball of fire sets, everyone can chow down



PANORAMA OF A NIGHT: The drive home may actually be the toughest part of a "faster" day. More than a few tired drivers, not just passengers have been known to fall asleep behind the wheel, inevitably exacerbating what are usually the worst traffic jams of the year. Those heading home from downtown on Ramsis Street are lucky enough to be handed a delicious date concoction just as the sun sets. Later on, from the crowds every night around El-Hussein, it might seem like the whole city is out and about. Usually, however, by the time the human alarm clock known as *el-mesaharati* begins his rounds, nearly everyone is back at home

(nuts) after his *iftar* tonight.

Perfect time to head to this district's most famous bangouts: El-Fishawi, El-Ghour, El-Azhar. But my first choice is always Mohamed Zaghloul's Ramadan coffee shop, where, as always during this holiest of months, the prime entertainment is women's wrestling on video.

There's never been a bigger pot of boiling meat than this. It's taller than the chef who stirs the brew with a giant spatula/shovel. There are potatoes everywhere, and wherever you look the potatoes are being peeled and chopped up by a dedicated kitchen staff. After all, the daytime hours are barely enough to finish up the equally huge quantities of vegetables and salad.

To provide nearly 12,000 meals for the poor every day, you have to cook non-stop. So by 1.37am, at least 13

giant cauldrons of macaroni have already been made in a warehouse located right next to Al-Hussein Mosque, a prime piece of real estate used by its owner Al-Hagg Kamal Ismail only during Ramadan for the *mal'at al-rahman* (charity *iftar* banquets) he sponsors every year.

Meat and macaroni don't go bad, says head chef Al-Hagg Abdel-Moneim, that's why they're made during the night. Giant cauldron after cauldron are cooked in preparation for the first pickup, which is at 9am. It takes a long time, after all, to box up the 5,000 or so of the meals that go to police stations all across Cairo, so that all those hungry officers not watching the intersections at *maghrib* can fill their bellies with food.

Masaken Sheraton is so close to the airport that some of the apartment blocks in this newest land furthest of

Cairo's suburbs sport blinking red light towers so that the airplanes don't crash and burn over this final corner of the city. At 3.15am, guided by the bright light of a not-quite full moon, the *mesaharati* (human alarm clock) begins his rounds. Surprisingly enough, two, not just one, bearded, hooded men with drums start to pace this out-of-the-way neighbourhood, which happens to straddle one of the freshest, nicest gardens in Cairo.

One *mesaharati* is called Abdel-Hamid. When he first arrived here 10 years ago this was still all desert. Now, as he strides quickly past the brand new apartment blocks, awakening the faithful for their pre-dawn snack, he calls out the few names of those residents he knows, but mostly it's an anonymous plea.

Edited by Fouad El-Gawhary

Memories of sweeter *iftars*

Gihan Shahine travels back in time while spending a Ramadan day at an old people's home

It is 4pm, almost an hour before the *iftar*. The streets are crowded with fasting Muslims racing back home for a cosy *iftar* with their families; housewives are busy putting the final touches on delicious meals; and young children wait eagerly, playing and watching TV.

However, life moves at a much slower pace at the Saydat Misr (Women of Egypt) Home for old people. Some residents stay in seclusion while others are too weak to leave their beds. Still, a considerable number maintain high spirits and gather around the TV to reminisce about the old days.

"Ramadan once had a much livelier spirit than it does now," 63-year-old Abdel-Hadi Mohamed, a father of five, recalls. In the popular district of Al-Helweya, near the Citadel, where Mohamed used to live when he was younger, Ramadan was always a feast for everybody. Though some of the old rituals still remain, feelings of fraternity and love among people and prosperity and benevolence — which all constituted the real spirit of Ramadan — are gradually fading away, according to Mohamed and most people from older generations.

"People still decorate their streets in some popular districts by hanging coloured *fananis* (lanterns), but they are probably not as happy deep down as [we] used to be," Mohamed laments. He explains that most people are lumbered with the high cost of living, which often doubles during the holy month when Ramadan treats such as *yamish* (dried dates, figs, nuts and apricot) are added to the monthly grocery bill. In the old days, when a sheep cost only LE1.50, a kilo of meat cost three piastres and an entire meal cost only 10 piastres, people filled their storerooms with *yamish* in preparation for Ramadan as they could afford it. These days, they cannot.

Another ritual also took place on the day before Ramadan. "In most popular districts, people were in the habit of having a special bath before any feast or occasion," Mohamed continues. "As no private bathrooms were available in those days, people used to crowd in the *hammanat* (public baths) where they soaked their bodies in large basins filled with hot water while a bath attendant bathed them with vinegar."

Many members of the older generations believe those days were more prosperous ones. "The first day of Ramadan was always a special occasion when we used to hold a large banquet with all sorts of food and sweets," says 75-year-old E'idal Khattab, who spent her childhood in the Nile Delta's rural centre Mit Ghamr. "All the women of the house spent the entire day cooking. The remnants of food went to the poor since there were no refrigerators to preserve it."

Extravagance still exists nowadays, especially among the richer strata of society, but in the past it never created the social divisions it does now. "The rich always knew where the poor were, sending them the same sorts of food they had for *iftar*. Now people hardly know their neighbours, or whether they are in need," Mohamed regrets.

Whereas people are now too busy with their lives, spending most of their leisure time watching TV, Ramadan was always a perfect time for socialising in the old days. Families used to gather each evening at a different home, where the host brought in a *muqri* to recite verses from the Qur'an. The men would collect around the *muqri* on the ground floor of the house while women listened from upstairs.

Ramadan was special for children as well. They would spend the evenings out carrying candle-lit lanterns and singing and playing. In many areas, popular singers broke the silence of the night with ballads sung along to the tunes of *al-rakaba* (traditional string instrument).

Khanab reminisces, "Before dawn, *al-mesaharati*, using a drum, woke people up to eat their pre-dawn meal of *sohour*. Since the population was smaller in those days, he used to call everyone by their names. He nicknamed me *odoula ol-gawhara al-masouna* (prized jewel) and I would hand him a tray of *konafa* in response."

Today when the *mu'azin* sounds the call for sunset prayer, the residents at Saydat Misr leave the memories of sweeter days gone by behind and eat the humble *iftar*, served to their old people's home.

Photos: Sherif Soudki & Laila Gorchiev



Queens' tombs at Giza are open to visitors for the first time

Giza's treasure plateau

The open-air museum envisioned in the Pyramids Plateau Master Plan has yet to be completed, but the plan is proceeding according to schedule. The conservation of the royal Tombs — Phase Three — is well under way, and the tomb of Meres-Ankh, one of the queens of Khufu, is now open to the public for the first time.

Meres-Ankh's tomb is adorned with remarkable rock-hewn statues of the queen, her daughters and her mother Hetep-Heres II. They are extremely life-like, appear to be free-standing, but are actually attached to the living rock. That is to say, when deep niches were cut in the tomb, part of the living rock was left and later carved into figures of the royal owner and her relatives. One niche holds a group of ten figures constituting pair statues such as man and wife, mother and daughter, which stand side by side.

This technique is not unique to the Giza necropolis; similar rock-hewn tombs were earlier cut at Saqqara. But they are particularly noteworthy because of Meres-Ankh's reputation: she was a wealthy woman in her own right. According to a text recorded from the east wall of her tomb, she had 13 funerary estates. This farmland was designed to forever provide offerings for her tomb. Meres-Ankh is the only queen who did not have a pyramid at Giza; she apparently died before it was built and was hurriedly buried in her tomb. Apart from the statues, the tomb is not decorated with the usual meticulous care.

Zahi Hawass, director-general of the Giza plateau antiquities, said his priority is to restore the monuments in order to consolidate their architectural features, and not beyond. "Every monument is a ruin, and should be kept as a ruin. Clearance and restoration have to run hand-in-hand and be carried out carefully, both inside and outside the structures," he said.

Since the beginning of the plateau project in 1992, noted Hawass, all fallen blocks of stone have been returned to their original positions, pyramid angles have been justified, silt and soot deposits removed, new wooden ladders and lighting systems installed in the burial chambers of each monument, and the

Stumbling across the new, restoring the old and inaugurating the restored. Jill Kamil and Nevine El-Aref sort out the progress made at the Giza plateau



monuments cleaned. "In the case of Meres-Ankh," he said, "the soot on the walls was the result of visitors burning candles to illuminate the tomb during the last century."

Numerous projects on the Giza plateau run simultaneously, as different phases of the Master Plan overlap. During Phase One, a private cleaning company was responsible for site sanitation, and access to the plateau by horse and camel drivers was restricted. Phase Two involved the conservation and restoration of the three major pyramids — Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure — as well as the Sphinx. Work on Khufu's pyramid is now complete, work on the pyramids of Khafre and Menkaure continue, and the Sphinx is in its final stages of repair and is expected to be officially inaugurated in mid-February. Work on the streets of mastaba-tombs in

the eastern necropolis is also complete. Activity is now focused on the royal tombs, such as that of Meres-Ankh.

Work on the plateau is constantly being held up because of unexpected discoveries. Although several major expeditions have worked at Giza ever since the 19th century, only now is the area being systematically excavated. Not surprisingly, objects, tombs and monuments are found wherever debris is cleared away. Some of the latter had been discovered earlier, but was subsequently "lost" due to obliteration by the sand. In all cases, clearance, restoration and documentation have to be carried out before work resumes.

The last four years have been witness to an exciting record of discovery. In the first season of work, for example, a false door belonging to a cer-

tain Ka-Nefter was uncovered during clearance of the Western Field — an archaeological area west of the plateau's main monuments. The door was in poor condition, but was returned to its original position in the tomb. This was a prudent beginning. Later, two shafts were excavated. One contained a skeleton in foetal position, the second some pottery shards dating the tomb to the First Intermediate Period, prior to the construction of the Pyramids.

Then, to the northern corner of the Western Field, archaeologists discovered another shaft, this time partly encased in mud-brick. The burial niche contained a mummified body with a plaster mask of a young woman, later cleaned by the Restoration and Conservation Department at Giza and the Supreme Council of Antiquities for analysis and restoration.

Meanwhile, work on the Sphinx has opened up renewed discussion on its age and significance. The discovery of three workmen's communities south-east of the Sphinx casts more light than ever before on the lives of the people who actually built the Pyramids. "We can finally give weight to the common belief that slaves built them," said Hawass.

Towards the end of last year, when the asphalt road to the east of Khufu's pyramid was being removed, a great boat pit was revealed. Further clearance of the area exposed the small 'satellite' pyramid of Khufu, and, soon afterwards, the cap-stone of the structure, which was restored. Within a few months, a rock-covered passageway was excavated in front of the Sphinx, leading to a 'purification chapel'.

For millions of people, the Pyramids of Giza describe ancient Egypt. No other monuments are so instantly recognised the world over, and no other in Egypt so frequently visited. And, as ever, people are thrilled by stories of kings and queens, their palaces and relationships. The opening up of the tomb of Meres-Ankh at Giza is, therefore, expected to be a major new attraction.

Other queens' tombs are being primed as tourist sites: the tomb shaft of Hetep-Heres, the mother of Khufu, in which her funerary equipment — now on display at the Cairo Museum — was found; Merit-It-Is, the mother of King Djedef-Ra, who ruled after Khufu and built his pyramid at Dahshur; and the pyramid of Henutsen, the wife of Khufu, whose questionable reputation was invented by guides in the time of Herodotus in the sixth century BC — and quoted by him. The small temple dedicated to Isis, in the same area, is usually attributed to Henutsen and is now also being restored.

Until recently, the area around the queens' tombs, while not actually blocked off to the public, was rarely visited. Now, they are expected to draw crowds. "They are important monuments and should not be missed," said Hawass, who nevertheless points out that the Plan is still a long way from completion.

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Under the dolphin's banner

Energised environmentalists scoured and swept clear Hurghada's beaches with promises to return. Sherine Nasr joined the garbage-pickers at sunrise

They could not be missed. They hunted through the main streets of Hurghada carrying large plastic bags, trooped along its public beaches and swam along its offshore reefs. They purged all visible waste from the sea, sand and asphalt in a round-the-clock effort to safeguard the area.

"We love our resort and we want to keep it clean and tidy," said Moustafa Kamel, one of over 400 volunteers who scooped up rubble and refuse just before the onset of the winter tourist season, in an effort to remove and wipe out environmental transgressions. This beachside resort — once a simple fishing village — has suffered at the hands of eager investors and from the lack of coordinated environmental protection. "The rapid and unplanned growth of Hurghada has unfortunately taken its toll on the environment," said Amr Shawki, the Hilton hotel's manager.

The clean-up volunteers came from Hurghada's international hotels and diving centres, the Red Sea Governorate, the Hurghada Environmental Preservation and Conservation Association (HEPCA) and the American University in Cairo (AUC). Participants said the effort was part of an ongoing campaign with future clean-ups scheduled every three months.

"Our natural resources are precious and they would be difficult to restore if destroyed," said volunteer Nadine Khedr, a member of AUC's Environmental Awareness Association. "The time is ripe for serious action."

Hurghada suffers from a chronic garbage problem, said Yassir Naficy, a member of HEPCA. Since the governorate only has seven tractors to collect refuse from the entire community, "there are haphazard garbage dumps around the city," she said, "and there are no garbage bins anywhere." At the day's end she estimated that volunteers had managed to collect literally "innings of garbage."

The HEPCA has already participated in beach clean-ups at Sharm El-Sheikh and its volunteers sport T-shirts with the slogan "Enough is



Volunteers purging all visible waste from sand and sea

Enough" voiced by a dolphin who leaps out of the water to throw an empty bottle to shore. The spirit is obviously catching: When Mohamed Soliman, a diving club manager, saw the enthusiastic volunteers, he offered to join and loan his boat in future clean-ups. "Cooperation among different bodies brings about effective results," he said.

In pursuit of solid plans for a cleaner Hurghada, HEPCA and the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) ecotourism initiative for the Red Sea will soon target hotels, tour operators, diving centres, guides, snorkel trip operators, fishermen and local residents, offering lectures on proper environmental practices and distributing slides, video clips, posters and educational leaflets in six different languages. Meanwhile, other concerned environmentalists have proposed an "Adopt-a-Road" programme, whereby each hotel would be responsible for maintaining two kilometres of the road in their immediate vicinity.

Keyword: quality

Intent on polishing the tourism industry's image, the Ministry of Tourism has dubbed 1996 the "quality" year. Rehab Saad reports the ministry's scheme

As travellers cross borders with itching intensity, tourist hawks worldwide strive to improve their competitive edge. Egypt's task is not less arduous. The tourism industry must not only manage to lure tourists here, they must get them back. For the Ministry of Tourism, service is one selling point.

Modern-day tourists differ from those of yesterday, says Minister of Tourism Mamdouh El-Beltagi. Most have travelled and are acutely aware of tourist perks, privileges and comforts available worldwide. And they expect them when they land in Egypt. The ministry's 1996 campaign strives to offer superior services to these tourists, and particularly to those who travel in groups.

Of the short and long-term solutions towards facilitating and ameliorating the quality of a traveller's experience in Egypt, Beltagi says that the government will organise professional training courses for employees of the tourist industry in order to meet international standards in tourist services. "The Hotel Association should identify all schools, faculties and institutions in Egypt associated with the tourist industry and review their syllabi," says Beltagi who also wants a comprehensive report on their training programmes and a proposal towards their enhancement through government and private sector collaboration. In the long term, the ministries of tourism, education and the Tourist Chamber Union must exert joint efforts towards this "quality" goal.

Creating a "tourism consciousness" in society is also on Beltagi's priority list. In an effort to increase public awareness, the Ministry of Tourism is already airing several spots on TV, coined "Tourism is the Future" which depict tourists receiving a warm Egyptian welcome as they descend from airplanes, enter taxis, roam the sites or wade through the Red Sea waters. Not only are they produced with the intent to show the benefit of tourism to the national income, but to encourage the service industry to extend an ever-obliging hand.

Still striving towards excellence, the Ministry recommends a legislative study to reconsider the laws governing tourism as well as periodic inspections of tourist establishments. "Attention is being paid to improving service quality in the Ministry of Tourism itself," says Beltagi, whose ministry will be connected to a "tourist information network" encompassing the Tourist Union Chamber, travel agents here and abroad, and related regional and international parties, and which will provide "fast and more accurate information" to Egypt's seekers and takers.

Quiz!

Islam Mustafa Abdel-Azim of Hadeyek Shubra is the lucky winner of the 11th week's December quiz. The prize is three days accommodation in a double room in Sonesta Beach Resort Sharm

The lucky winner

El-Sheikh on bed only basis courtesy of Sonesta Hotels, Resorts & Nile Cruises. Please come to pick up your prize from 12pm to 4pm any day except Thursday and Friday.

Ramadan games

INAUGURATING the Horus Club Ramadan Tournament, which began on Monday and ends 13 February, was President Hosni Mubarak. More than 5,000 spectators converged on Cairo Stadium for the opening ceremonies which were marked by a soccer match between teams of 17 and 19 year-old players. With age comes wisdom, and in this case victory, as the 19 year-olds trounced their younger opponents.

Also strutting their stuff were the members of the national handball team who took fourth place in the last month's World Cup in Sweden. President Mubarak, himself an avid sportsman and fan, cheered the team on.

Following the opening ceremony, which also included a song and dance routine, President Mubarak was treated to a laser show celebrating Egypt's hosting of the 1997 Under-17 World Cup Soccer competition.



African cup goes south

For the first time in history, South Africa kissed the African Cup of Nations after a thrilling encounter with Tunisia, the climax of the three-week tournament which ended in an unpredicted battle between North and South, writes Eric Asomugha

On Saturday, before a reported 90,000-strong crowd, the highest turnout in the tournament, South Africa defeated Tunisia 2-0.

A goalless first half heightened tension before substitute striker Mark Williams struck twice in the second half to bring Johannesburg's FNB Stadium to life. Williams found the net in the 72nd and 75th minute, giving South Africa a historic win and sending the African Cup of Nations to the south of the continent for the first time.

On the road to victory, South Africa demolished Cameroon 3-0 in the opening match, had a lucky 1-0 win over Angola, followed by a 0-1 defeat by Egypt. They nevertheless secured first place in Group A. They continued their demolition of the giants by trouncing tournament favourites Ghana 3-0 in the semifinal, after beating Algeria 2-1 in the quarterfinal.

Tunisia had it tougher, losing 1-2 to Ghana in their first Group D match. They then drew 1-1 with underdog Mozambique and beat Côte d'Ivoire 3-1. In a nail-biting quarterfinal, Tunisia secured a "sudden death" 4-1 penalty win over Gabon before overwhelming Zambia 4-2 in the semifinal.

The parties to the final showdown came as a major surprise to analysts and fans alike, proving once and for all that football results cannot be calculated like mathematical equations. With the sudden withdrawal of Nigeria on grounds of security, all attention had turned to Ghana and its army of professionals. If they failed to secure the cup, Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia, Egypt and 1990 World Cup African pace-setters Cameroon were next in line, so the experts said. South Africa and Tunisia were unfancied teams from the start.

Apartheid denied South Africa, a founding member of the Confederation of African Football, a place in the tournament for many years. Their football comeback was marked by shocking defeats in the 1994 African World Cup qualification matches.

Tunisia had their previous best outing back in 1965, when they finished second in the African Cup of Nations. In last year's competition, Tunisia, the hosts, were humbled 2-0 by Mali in the opening match, and were dropped in the first round.

The new South Africa is rapidly becoming a dominant force in the world of sport. South Africa won the Rugby World Cup eight months ago, a bronze in the badminton World Championships, came top in the 6th All Africa Games in Zimbabwe, and crushed England in a series of cricket tests and one-day internationals in December and January. Now the nation has capped it all with the prestigious African Cup of Nations.

Meanwhile, predicted finalists Zambia and Ghana, both of which played extraordinary football in the preliminary round, had to slog it out for third and fourth place, with 1994 finalists Zambia defeating Ghana 1-0 with a 30-metre strike by Joel Bwalya in the 51st minute.

There were individual cases of disappointment on both sides: Ghanaian Tony Yeboah of Leeds United failed to find his feet in the quarterfinal and Abedi Pele missed the last two matches due to injury. This is unfortunate, as it looks as if he is nearing the end of his career without another ACN win under his belt since his days on Ghana's 1982 ACN-winning squad. Kalusha Bwalya of Zambia, once an African great and still in there with the top players, faces a similar plight. Many of his original teammates were lost in the tragic plane crash of 1993.

Olympic handball brawl

The finals of the 2nd Super League Handball Tournament in Tanta between the Ahli, Olympic, Sporting and Zamalek clubs, took on a new twist as the Olympic handball team honed its hand to eye coordination by attacking the referee of their match against Ahli club's handball team.

Although Olympic had been dominating the match until Ahli's handballers turned on the heat to tie the score at 22-22. In the last minute of the match, Ahli scored another goal, putting them just seconds away from victory and pushing the frenzied fans to new heights of excitement. Olympic's Amr El-Gewishi, in the last 18th second of the match went airborne in an attempt to score only to be rewarded for his efforts by being knocked down by an Ahli defender. The referee stopped the match and called for a foul, and at that point, all hell broke loose. When Olympic's demands for a penalty were not met, the team, led by team captain Ahmed Belal, Hela Abdel-Salam and coach Mahmoud El-Marghani, pounced on the referee who was saved by the skin of his teeth by the security guards. Although he sustained no physical injuries, he did cringe under the verbal abuse, thereby disproving the old adage that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

With the match way out of control, the referees cancelled it, leaving both teams and the fans enveloped in a shroud of mystery as

A handball match became a royal rumble as Olympic contested a call and was left holding the ball

to who won.

The cancellation of the match, however, was not the end of the Olympic's woes. Two days after the match, it was time for Olympic to pay the piper. The Egyptian Handball Federation (EHF) cancelled the team's results in the two super league tournaments, dropped them to the Class B division for the 1996-97 season, banned their coach from coaching and awarded Belal and Abdel-Salam a one year suspension. Additionally, both match referees were called in for questioning.

For Olympic, one of the country's top handball teams, these penalties came as a harsh blow. Five of the team's players are members of the national team, and Belal, who is one of them, will now not be able to compete in the Olympics next July.

Try as it might, try as it may, Olympic protested the decisions but could not save the day. The EHF was adamant. Aiding Olympic in their dispute with the EHF was the head of the Alexandria zone, Essam Abdel-Magoud. The Alexandria zone head submitted a petition on behalf of Olympic demanding that the EHF reduce the penalties arguing that "these punishments will neg-



South African Moshoe John (L) collects a ball in mid-air as Tunisia's Zoubair Beya follows up at FNB Stadium (photo: AFP)

Play it again Hossam

The Ramadan competition "The Winner Remains" was a star-studded one this year, as Eman Abdel-Moati reports

Old soccer stars never die, at least not in the minds of their fans. Even suspended players are not forgotten, and supporters wait patiently for their return to the field. Last Friday, some of Egypt's best-known retired players, adored as much now as when they were twenty-something ace scorers, made a comeback to take part in the annual Ramadan competition "The Winner Remains".

The 2,000 spectators who managed to tear themselves away from Ramadan TV shows or the Egypt Cup qualifying matches to make the journey to the stadium found themselves amply rewarded for their efforts.

The footballers were joined on the field by a full complement of film stars and pop singers. This year's event started out as usual, with two teams playing five-a-side football, another two teams playing handball, others basketball, and singers playing penalty shots and giving the audience a song when they failed to score.

Just as an interesting match between a team of top singers and soccer players was heating up, the crowd's attention was diverted to the back of the stands. A roar went around the stadium as necks craned around to see the cause of the excitement. The players on the pitch, who had stopped their game, could see nothing at first. But when they glimpsed the man in black descending from the stand towards the field, players, referees and cameramen joined the crowd in their standing ovation for the national soccer team star who retired nine years ago, Mahmoud El-Khatib, better known as Bebo. "I can't believe it. This is the first time I've come to 'The Winner Remains' and it was well worth it to see Bebo", said one of dozens of fans who leaned over the stands to get El-Khatib's autograph.

El-Khatib was clearly flattered by the warmth of his welcome. "I was surprised by this enthusiastic reaction. I didn't expect it to be like that", he said. "I can't find the words to thank them, except to say that I wish I was young again so that I could give more." As a national team player, El-Khatib scored many unforgettable goals in the seventies and the eighties before his retirement in 1987 at

the age of 34. Another two soccer stars — absent from national team matches for the last three months — Ahli twins Hossam and Ibrahim Hassan, also turned out for "The Winner Remains", amidst cheers and requests for autographs. Hossam and Ibrahim, once stars of the Egyptian team, are now playing with Ahli in domestic competitions. Three months ago, the Egyptian Soccer Federation suspended Hossam until further notice as punishment for his violent action in a match against Lebanon. Both twins have vowed never to return to the national team.

"We like to maintain a good relationship with the fans so that they will always remember us with admiration", remarked Hossam. Maintaining a good relationship with the fans is certainly one of the reasons why pop singers like Hakim, Amer Monib, and film stars like El-Montaser Bellah take part in the "The Winner Remains". They also maintain that the competition relaxes them. "We spend long hours in the studios," said Bellah. "This kind of competition is invigorating recreation for us."

And, of course, giving people the chance to watch their favourite athletes, pop singers and movie stars trying their hand at sport encourages the public to do likewise, and promotes Egyptian sport in general. This is the philosophy of Abdel-Wahed Abdel-Aziz, director of the Sport for All Department at the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports. "The Winner Remains" is one of many friendly competitions we organise which helps put less popular sports like basketball, and handball in the public eye," he explained.

All the events in "The Winner Remains" are based on penalty shots. A player remains in competition as long as he/she keeps scoring; once he or she misses, another player comes in. The winner is the one who scores the most goals in each game.

While singer Aida El-Ayoubi, actor El-Montaser Bellah and Zamalek player Tarek Yehia won their events with their high scores, others, like El-Khatib and the Hassan twins, will always be winners to their fans.

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Bondoq and Anous: It takes two

Life is full of tough choices. Are you going to be the wise man or the show-boater? Do you want to go to the circus or the zar? Would you rather be happy, or amazed?

"The Tannoura is a guaranteed success wherever it goes," says Salah Enani, who founded and continues to direct the mega-talented troupe of musicians and dancers famous the world over as the The Whirling Dervishes. That guarantee mainly rests on the heads of two men. Night after night, Bondoq and Anous whirl themselves and their audience into a world where gravity and the laws of physics no longer matter, where the entire world is, in fact, concentrated in the physical act of a man spinning counterclockwise around his own axis.

Bondoq and Anous are guaranteed crowd pleasers. How could you not feel ecstatic — or at least stupefied — while watching a man spin 120 times a minute, bright rainbow skirts flying around him like waves, not five feet away from where you sit? It would be impossible not to wonder how he can spin for so long without getting dizzy.

Perhaps you can tell from their faces while they perform. Bondoq is dark, and exudes Nubian elegance. His eyes are always smiling. With the streak of gray in his hair hidden by a headdress, he looks boyish, almost angelic. Anous's long, curly hair gives him more of the aura of a martial arts expert. Intense concentration pervades his steady stare, an ethos of hard work belied by a mischievous mustache.

Anous's spinning is pure entertainment. He does things Bondoq — who claims to be a Sufi — would (could) never do, like lifting the skirts over his head with two sticks until he looks like a gigantic spinning multi-colored lantern. Although performing Sufi rituals without the proper spiritual bent is supposedly bad karma, Anous is not worried. He believes in God, that God has given him this gift, and that as long as he remains modest — in spite of the fame, world travel and potential fortunes — things will be okay.

Bondoq is another story altogether. His father and grandfather were both whirling dervishes. Although it might at first sound hard to believe, Bondoq tries to reach a higher spiritual plane during each performance. He feels as if he's presiding at a *hadra* or *zar*, helping to inspire a healing process that must be taken very seriously.

Anous didn't inherit his trade — he learned it from a local sheikh, a guy who lived down the block from him in the Zawya. Although he would over consider himself a Sufi, as practice growing up Anous used to perform at local *zars*. His desire to spin is an illness he doesn't want to cure.

AL-GHOURI Palace is quiet but for the sounds of a *rababa* and drum, way off in the distance, backstage. It's ten nights into Ramadan, and the Dervishes have just come back from Paris. Two TV stations are here to record the historic moment. The performers themselves seem astonished that they're already on stage so soon after their return. The echoes of the 15-minute standing ovation they received three nights straight in Paris must still be ringing in their ears...

One by one each of the performers do a solo —



first the *mizmar*, then the drum. I look across the audience and catch sight of Anous — for some reason he's not backstage getting dressed. There's a cat on his lap and he's busy petting it and staring off into space. I wonder what he's thinking.

When the drummer begins whirling, Anous stares him down like there's no tomorrow. He looks critical, worried, intense all at the same time. He seems to be looking at the man's feet to make sure their placement is just right. Then, when he's finished, Anous lets out a monster whistle, making as much of a positive screech as he can. He's trying to create a ruckus for the cameras' sake. One by one the minor dervishes step into the spotlight for their solos. Anous is like the third base coach — he winks, stretches his mustache, gives signals to each performer. With each concluding solo, Anous's whistles and catcalls get louder — he's practically jumping out of himself in a ruckus of joy, cheering his colleagues on with admirable gusto.

Later, Anous is the same way backstage. He never stops trying to make a scene or pull someone's leg, and just like Bondoq, he smokes cigarettes up until the moment he goes on.

Bondoq backstage gives orders, recites Qur'an, and looks mostly serious as he waits for the water to boil. Later, waiting for his cue, I spy Bondoq staring at the ground, tea and cigarette in hand. I wonder what he's thinking, and decide to ask him point blank.

"God," he says, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Then he goes back to reciting something under his breath.

For some orders, such as the *Mevlevi*, or "Whirling Dervishes", dance movements, hand gestures and dance attire all have cosmic and spiritual significance; during the *Mevlevi* *sema*, or ceremony, each dancer spins counter-clockwise around the *shaykh*, symbolizing the rotation of the planets around the sun.

— from the Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East

It's as if he's rising out of the audience. The first thing I notice is his bare feet. Then, how bright his yellow skirt is — nearly fluorescent. Like planets, the five minor dervishes form a spinning circle

around the smiling golden sun called Bondoq. They prance around him almost heavily while he seems to float with the rhythm. His aura goes far beyond the limits of physical presence.

The lights go off and the second act begins. We journey deep into the heart of the universe. Now the sun has become an entire solar system — Bondoq is wearing three skirts instead of one, and spinning at a perfectly even pace. I begin to feel like I am at a real live *zar*. This public display of a Sufi ritual, complete with spotlights and touristic flashbulbs, has suddenly been given a truly mystical air. The musicians, the rhythms, the colours, all have a lot to do with it, but in the end, without Bondoq it would just be five guys with *tablas* dancing around.

As his spinning speeds up, so does the beating of my heart, till I feel it might burst, and then he spins even faster, and removes another layer of skirts...

"Bondoq opens the show," says Anous, backstage, "and I close it." He smiles. Is he implying something?

"Outside Egypt it's the opposite. I open and he closes."

No reason?

"Just for a change of pace," he says, grinning, then gives Bondoq, whose performance has just ended, a high five.

THERE are no planets revolving round this sun. On stage, Anous is on another planet altogether, an unidentified flying saucer. He spins with a much more obvious step and push on each turn, but his skirts hide a great big bag of tricks. In an instant Anous can become a gigantic lantern and then a whirling yo-yo, or else, skirt balanced on his head, a roulette wheel, or a top spinning at the speed of sound.

The drummers continue their skyrocket into the upper stratospheres of beat, and Anous arrives at his attention-grabbing solo — strutting round the stage, he spins the skirt above his head with one hand, a psychedelic pizza tosser doing gymnastics in an ancient palace, truly performing for the crowd. The spinning skirt comes so close that a woman in the front row gasps and ducks.

The beats become more staccato, and all of a sudden Anous tosses the skirt into the air as he and it continue to spin, before gathering it all together in a

cloud of dust as the music stops.

Tonight Anous gets the standing ovation — it's that final, staccato push that does it, makes the crowd go crazy — it's like they've just seen the main attraction at a circus...

"It's hard to put into words," says Nihal to her friends as she leaves the palace after the show. "With Anous, you have to concentrate on the details of the performance: how many skirts, how high, how low, how fast... with Bondoq I can take in the whole atmosphere, meditate even."

This is the second Ramadan in a row that she's come to watch the Whirling Dervishes perform. "Watching Bondoq makes me happy," she says. "Watching Anous makes me say 'wow!'"

A COUPLE of nights later I sat back and let Bondoq tell me his story the way he wanted to. His serious demeanor made the tale seem like it had practically become a legend in his own mind. How he grew up on Al-Muezz Lidiin Allah Street, how he used to travel to *moulids* with his father and in the process met a dervish called El-Atter, who used to take his performances to new levels. Soon Bondoq was practicing with a blanket at home, innovating on the *tannoura* his father taught him, adding features of his own that he picked up from staring at old buildings, from spending a lot of time in dark places. He began trying to imitate nature in his dance — the birds, dew drops, the movement of the water on the Nile. People started talking about him; he began getting more offers to perform than his father. "I had made a good name for myself in the business," he says.

The business? I didn't think that was his style. "I'm not in this for the money," he said. "If I was I'd have been out of here a long time ago. I'd have taken any one of the dozens of offers to perform here or there. I've been abroad, I've seen how artists are treated, what they can ask for — but here I work for LE120 a month, just like every other musician in the troupe. We're all equals — I mean, if I was materialistic I would have at least asked for a car to take me here then back home again, you know... No, I do this for God, for the people who come to watch. Were you here last night? The tourists mobbed me, and they were all crying, they said they were crying for me..."

IN THE END, the audience is all that matters. And last Sunday night, right after the troupe put on a special extended performance for a huge crowd at the French Cultural Centre in Mounira, I really got an insight into how dedicated Anous is to his fans and his craft.

By dodging late-night Ramadan traffic from Mounira, through Lazoghli Square and down Al-Azhar Street in what could have been seconds, Anous, whose real joy comes from the audience's applause, got to have two highs in one night, and the Ghouri audience, who might not have known better in the first place, were treated to a truly spectacular show.

When I walked into the palace Anous and Adel, the flamboyant *sagat* player, were arguing with Enani, who had already started the night's performance with the second *tannoura* team.

"Give the young guys a chance," said Enani. But Anous and Adel were high off their first success of the evening and desperate to perform again. When Enani finally relented, the two of them literally jumped for joy, then rushed to join the performance in progress.

The minute they came on, the show, which was going fine, suddenly became *ultra-charged*. Their positive energy flowed to the rest of the troupe, and we watched spellbound as Anous kicked into the stunning part of his act for the second time in less than half an hour. He spun faster than ever before, it seemed to me, and with a zealous joy that was unstoppable.

REALLY getting to know Bondoq and Anous — or anyone for that matter — might easily lessen the mystique of what they do. The distance provided by the stage is narrowed. Perhaps they know this and unconsciously react — as Enani puts it — by exaggerating their roles, mixing performance and reality into a neat little package. We all do it in one way or another.

But whether or not their personalities really match what they do on stage is irrelevant. With the help of a willing audience Bondoq and Anous have formed a perfect circle called *tannoura*, and eight years later, it's still spinning strong.

Profile by Tarek Atia

Pack of Cards

by Madame Sosostreis

♣ Ash... Ramadan... hours of fasting followed by hours of bingeing — who could ask for anything more? And recently, I embarked on a bingeing spree again, only this time to demonstrate true patriotism and religious tolerance rather than anything else. As guests of Aaba Basanti, the bishop of Helwan and Ma'sara, colleague Mahmoud Bakr and I gorged ourselves on a most sumptuous *iftar* at the Aaba Barsom Al-Aryan monastery a couple of days ago. The *iftar* was graciously held by the office of the Diocese of Helwan and Ma'sara as a demonstration of goodwill and unity between Muslims and Christians in Egypt during the month of Ramadan. With over five hundred guests present, it was a little difficult, dear, to notice everyone — my main concern, of course being the buffet, but I did manage to catch glimpses of the Minister of Military Production Mohamed El-Ghamrawi, former Head of the People's Security Committee Kamal Hauri Abdur, surgeon Khairy El-Samra, and several prominent figures in the Egyptian judiciary and religious circles. Much to my delight, I also came across my good friend, director of the National Theatre and the Hanager Centre Hoda Wassefi, artist Ramzes, and singer Samir El-Iskandarani, who entertained us all as we were by singing one of his most



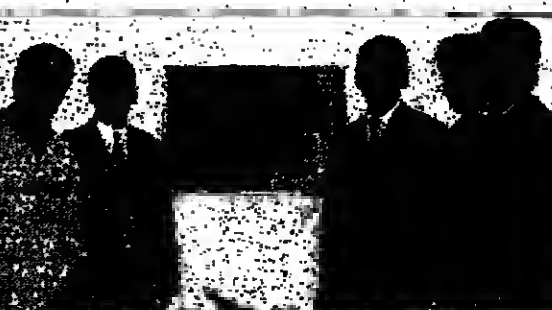
Aaba Basanti (with El-Ghamrawi on his right) speaks to the guests on the joys of religious harmony and understanding

popular songs, *Yo Robb Baladi wa Habayti* (God, My Country and My Loved Ones).

♥ Walking into the Gezira Club last week, why dears I was convinced I had taken a wrong turn somewhere and accidentally walked into a hospital. Surrounding me was

practically each and every single person in the medical community, representing a multitude of fields, generations, and alphabetical letters. So many MDs, PhDs, Ob-Gyns and GPs, etc., in fact, that I couldn't possibly begin to even start listing them all. Only when I had recovered from the shock, and was wel-

comed by the host, renowned surgeon and chairman of the board of Al-Salam Hospital in Mohandessin, Fathi Iskander, and his charming wife Reia, an anaesthetist, that I found my bearings and remembered that the event in question, of course, was the hospital's delicious annual Ramadan *iftar*.



Jagor (first right) and his Croatian chums celebrate fame at last

Amidst a host of public figures, there was one couple who caught my attention and, being life-long friends of mine, kept it for most of the evening — legendary actress Faten Hamama, accompanying her husband, renowned radiologist Mohamed Abdel-Wahab. I did, however, make sure to find

spired by the beauty of the country, has since then been painting, painting away. "The Light of Egypt" recently inaugurated at the Egyptian Centre for International Cultural Cooperation in Cairo, is the exhibition featuring these marvellous works. It was there that I met several members of the Qatani community living in Cairo, most of whom, luckily for me, were all extremely charming.



Tahia Abdel-Nasser



Edward Walker waxing lyrical on the podium

♣ Another term over, another graduation ceremony at the American University in Cairo. Usually, I like to take a good book along with me. This year, however, when I heard that the commencement address was to be delivered by my good friend, US Ambassador Edward Walker, I decided to leave the reading material behind, convinced that this would be one year, at least, when the speech would actually be worth listening to. And it was. Tears came to my eyes, dear, as, 19 years after President Sadat's peace initiative, Walker proudly referred to the graduating class as being a part of the "generation of peace" to which the future of Egypt belonged. And although at that point I was overwhelmed with a feeling of inevitable doom, I did refrain from voicing out loud what a terrifying prospect I found that to be. I was, after all, surrounded by the proud

families and friends of 320 undergraduate and 53 masters students. I already knew that granddaughter of the late President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, Tahia Khaled, would be graduating. Not only is she a dear friend of mine, but has just recently also earned the respectable title of "colleague" here at the *Week-ly*. What I didn't know, however, was that many other names called out that evening would sound familiar to me, and I made sure to rush out at the end of the ceremony to congratulate Ayman Salah Taher, son of the famous artist: Nevine, daughter of chairman and editor-in-chief of *Akhbar Al-Yom* Ibrahim Sa'dat; TV announcer Farida El-Zomer's daughter, Hana Rashad; TV announcer Ahmed Farag's daughter, Hana; and Mahmoud, son of former minister and AUC councillor Nagi Shafiq.

♣ The Cairo Sheraton never fails to amaze me. Having previously come up with the idea of asking it's guests to vote for the employee with the biggest smile, the hotel has now decided to turn us even more by putting together a "smilewell committee". From now on, guests will have the dubious honour of being frantically waved goodbye to by the smiling committee ("Adieu, adieu, to you and you and you!") as they drive away from the hotel and head back home from whence they came.